

all your demons and desires and dark sides

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by [brightlyburning](#)

Summary

Recently discharged from the military after losing an arm during a training exercise, Erwin Smith returns to the BDSM club he once frequented, hoping to find someone willing to give him control. There, he is introduced to Levi, another former soldier, new to the scene and burdened with a past he's unwilling to speak of.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Erwin!" Mike blinks at him, eyes dark in the reddish light of the bar, hands occupied with washing out glasses. "Long time no see. Heard you got hurt." His eyes dart to Erwin's empty right sleeve, the cloth pinned back on itself to keep from flapping, and the skin around his eyes goes tight in sympathy.

Or perhaps Erwin just stinks of pain. That is also a possibility; he's been doing occupational therapy and rehab for phantom limb pains since he got out of the hospital, but the void where his limb should be still vacillates between burning and itching. "My psychiatrist insisted I get out again, after I got discharged for the arm," he says as he takes his regular seat at the bar, half-turned to watch the demonstration on stage: Hanji, showing off medical play to the new members, and one of the club's professional subs writhing on a table as Hanji runs a Wartenberg wheel over the soles of her feet.

Mike grins. "Did you tell your psychiatrist you were going to a kink club?"

Erwin has to laugh at that. Dr. Arlert, while very young, is a good and accepting psychiatrist, but he'd spontaneously combust if Erwin hinted at his proclivities. "No. And I'm not going to, either. Can I have a gin and tonic?" He could ask for something non-alcoholic so he could participate, but it's been nearly a year since he's been here, and he wants to take it all in.

"If you let me stamp your hand so everyone knows you've been drinking."

Erwin offers his hand so Mike can stamp it with the red X that lets people know he's not safe to play with that night, then takes his drink with a smile. "So. What have I missed?"

Mike starts polishing highball glasses, scanning the club's booths and small dance floor as he thinks. "Bertholdt and Reiner have started dating someone new: a woman named Annie, mostly dominant. Bertholdt's got two people to order him around now, but if he likes it, I guess it's good. Nanaba got his top surgery a few months ago and is still healing up, but so far so good. Jean and Marco seem to be getting closer and closer to a collaring, though everyone's mostly just waiting for Marco to tell Jean he's ready and to do it already. Ymir did collar Krista, but Krista's still absolutely the pants-wearer outside of the club. Hanji and Rico are still friends with benefits, Sasha and Connie come in once a month to demo food play... that's pretty much everyone in the old crew."

Erwin takes a sip to give himself time to gather his thoughts. It's easy to feel a little lost, when so much has changed, but he's changed the most: become older and harder and exhausted by pain and struggling to adjust to a body that doesn't match who he saw himself as for forty years. "I see. Any additions I should know about?"

"There's Jaeger and Ackerman," Mike says, placing the glasses on a tall shelf and starting to wipe down the counter. "Nobody knows what their deal is, and Jaeger's temper is so

explosive nobody wants to get too close. Ackerman's the usual ice queen stereotype, but really they're both good kids. They care. Then there's their... 'friend,' I guess, Levi."

Erwin frowns over the lip of the glass. "Not certain?"

Mike laughs. "No, it's just that if you asked Levi he'd say they were shitty-ass kids who he has the bad fucking luck to live next to and they don't know how to take 'leave me alone' for an answer."

"Charming."

"If you don't mind condescension and cursing, I guess. Levi's-" Mike pauses, glancing around to make sure none of the other bar patrons are listening in, and says, "-he's beautiful, and a lot of the unattached doms in the club have had a crack at him, but it only ever lasts a night."

"What, he drives them away?"

Mike shrugs. "A lot of them say he's a bad sub."

Erwin stops himself from clenching his jaw, but it's a near thing. "In my opinion, there's no such thing as a bad sub, only bad doms. If a sub's acting out, it's because you haven't earned their trust."

"No, I agree, I'm not saying they're right. Besides," Mike pauses, "if I weren't with Nanaba, I might try to get Levi into my bed, too."

"That good, huh?" Erwin swirls the ice cubes at the bottom of the glass, thinking. "You have a hunch about him?" Mike tends to get hunches about people, and nine times out of ten they're right, although the only thing he says about his methods is that 'the nose knows.'

A moment's hesitation. He looks up, and Mike's staring into the middle distance, frozen in thought for a moment before he leans over the bar to say quietly,

"I think Levi has a lot of issues. The sense I get is OCD, maybe anxiety, I don't know - he's completely locked in his own head, and I don't think he knows how to let go of anything. Might be a reason for his surliness. Paranoid, too - he checks rooms like you do."

Possibly ex-military, too, then.

"But I think that if somebody clicked with him, and if they could figure him out, then I think- I think they could be amazing together. The hunch I get is that Levi wants to trust somebody, he just doesn't know how."

Erwin raises a brow. "Obviously he's made an impression on everybody, if you talk this much about him."

Mike grins, suddenly, like a shark smelling blood in the water. "Let me point him out for you, and you'll get what I mean."

Well. Game, set, match.

"There he is." Mike nods at the end of the bar, closer to the stage.

Erwin follows his gaze, and is silent.

Mike had been right.

Levi is beautiful, the same way deadly things are beautiful, all coiled potential for violence: small-framed, yet broad-shouldered, the impatiently-pushed-up sleeves of his gray shirt straining about the curves of his biceps as he rests his chin on one hand and stirs the melting ice cubes in his drink with the other. His dark hair is cut short in the back - another military affectation - and his eyes, dark and sullen, betray his lack of expression: they are alive, marking all the movements in the room with precision.

Erwin is instantly intrigued. He slides off his bar stool, glass in his hand, and approaches Levi, sure to make enough sound to not startle the other man.

Levi half-turns. He looks Erwin over, gaze stopping for a moment on his missing arm. Point in his favor: Erwin would much rather people look their fill once and get it over with rather than pretend he isn't missing a limb.

"Yeah?" Levi's voice is as hard as the rest of him.

"Buy you a drink?" Erwin nods at the stool next to Levi, and Levi snorts.

"Fine, if you can pick something that doesn't taste like piss."

Erwin signals Mike for one of the more unusual microbrews, then takes a seat, momentarily unbalanced. He's still working on getting his perception of his body and motions up to date.

Levi takes the beer Mike slides him, then gives Erwin a suspicious glance. There's something feline and wary in the jut of his jaw, a warning.

"Just try it," Erwin says, grinning despite himself at the sudden obstinacy. "You might like it."

Levi takes a sip, then another, rolling it about his mouth thoughtfully, before the long graceful line of his throat bobs in a swallow. "It's not abysmal. Well-hydrated piss," he concedes, then offers a hand. "Levi."

"Erwin Smith." Levi's hand is calloused and strong, though Erwin's own massive mitt practically swallows it up. "Nice to meet you."

Levi tilts his head, assessment gleaming in his eyes. "So, how's this work? You buy me an acceptable beer and think I owe you an hour in the private rooms?"

"No." Erwin isn't stung by the comment, though it's a near thing, and he privately wonders who Levi's been talking to, if this is his perception. He lifts his hand to show the red X. "I had a gin and tonic, so I'm not safe to play tonight."

"Play?" Levi echoes. He turns to face Erwin head-on, hooking one booted foot about the metal frame of the bar stool. "Thought this was supposed to be serious. Most of the assholes

here act like it's life and death."

Erwin manages not to roll his eyes. "Most of them don't have enough of a personality to define themselves by anything other than their kinks. This is supposed to be amusing, not a hardship."

Levi absorbs that with a moment of silence, then looks at Erwin more keenly.

Erwin wants, so suddenly it surprises him, to impress Levi, to find out what's beneath that acid shell.

"What happened to your arm?" Levi asks like it's a normal question, and there's relief in that, in the straightforwardness of him when it seems like Erwin's arm has become taboo to speak of, a void in word as well as reality.

"I was an instructor in the military for the Airborne: parachutes and high altitude egress, mostly." At that, Levi tilts his head, some expression flickering across that sullen, narrow face.

"I was assigned to be the test jumper for a new high altitude system; the contractor failed to perform due diligence on the metal frame attached to the bottom of the balloons. We were high up enough that the metal frame froze, and a wind gust came at just the right angle to shear half of the frame off. Part of the metal hit me about halfway up my upper arm." Erwin demonstrates with his hand.

"And you survived?"

"Barely. More luck than skill, really," Erwin admits, and there's another flicker of surprise in Levi's eyes. "I managed to untangle my rig and dive, and I was high enough that the cold constricted the vessels and prevented me from bleeding out. If I'd been lower I would've died." A small, grim smile. "I lost consciousness after about fifteen seconds, but my safety cord had stayed intact, so the chute deployed automatically. Frostbite and metal shards necessitated the removal of the rest of the arm, and I was discharged honorably." He shrugs. "The contractor paid me a good settlement."

"Sounds like the military, to hire a contractor with their head so far up their own ass." Levi holds himself completely rigid, like a man who's never given up anything in his life, or a man afraid to bend, terrified to give over and yet wanting nothing more. He'd look good in ropes, fighting the bonds until he's convinced he's safe, that he can't hold any responsibility, and Erwin's hand itches to reach out and curl about his slender, pale throat, to ease him down onto his knees and keep him there.

"You have an infantry hairstyle," Erwin says, taking a sip. "Still active-duty?"

Levi withdraws, shoulders hunching. "No. Discharged for medical reasons." He glances at Erwin, as though expecting to be pressed, and when Erwin says nothing, relaxes enough to take a sip of beer. There's something dangerous in him, an awareness of space and people that speaks of violence.

Erwin notices for the first time that the hand he didn't shake is wrapped in the style of a fighter's, the bandages bloodied over the knuckles. A small, pale hand, and yet the blood and the way Levi holds himself makes its presence a threat.

"You're experienced with this, then?" Levi nods at the stage, where Hanji's moved on to drawing a dulled knife, chilled in a cup of ice, down her blindfolded sub's back.

"I've been in this scene for about ten years." Erwin finishes his drink and sets the empty glass back on the bar for Mike. "But it's been about six months since I've come to the club. I was stationed out of state, and then I lost the arm and had to go through rehab. This is my first night back, actually. You?"

Levi bares his teeth in something Erwin's hard-pressed to call a smile. "This is my fourth time here. I'm still the fresh meat."

"I highly doubt you're anyone's prey," says Erwin, amused at the idea. "Though if you're new, got any idea what you like?"

Levi searches his face for something, and Erwin remains still, keeps his expression blandly friendly. "Not what I like, no," Levi says after a long moment. He goes silent, as if deliberating whether to place any trust in Erwin, then continues, half-reluctantly, "I don't like having my limbs bound. I don't like sensory deprivation." Another pause, another searching stare, as if trying to find something in Erwin to dissuade him.

It's unusual, and surprisingly pleasant, for Erwin to feel like he has to prove himself. So often before the accident he couldn't walk into the club without several unattached subs competing for his attention, as if Erwin, by virtue of being dominant, experienced, and not unattractive (then) was instantaneously worthy of trust. The role reversal is enticing.

"I despise humiliation," Levi says finally, chin jutting out in challenge. "One of the men I met my first night here tried it. Bad fucking choice." He's utterly still, stiff, as if to bend the slightest bit will shatter him. "Doesn't take me anywhere pleasant."

"Sounds like you haven't had many good experiences." Erwin keeps his voice empty of judgment. Levi seems like a labyrinth, a maze trapped at every turn, but the slight tilt of his head to Erwin, baring his throat, promises reward for the one brave enough to discover the way through. He wouldn't mind being that man.

Levi's smile is a sneer, sick with self-loathing. "I'm a fuckton of work."

Erwin shrugs his remaining shoulder. "And I'm no one's idea of the perfect dominant now that I'm missing an arm. If you want me to tie you while you fight back, that's not going to happen. Neither are several positions. Just means you have to figure out what works for you and your partner."

"True," says Levi. "Surprisingly realistic coming from a man who spends time with freaks dressed up like ponies and deviant doctors."

“I served for fifteen years. If you’re not good and practical by five years in, there’s something wrong.” Speaking of practicality. Erwin fishes out an old receipt from his pocket, uncaps a pen in his teeth, and scribbles his name and phone number on it. The handwriting’s shaky, but legible; it was one of the first skills the therapists had him work on after completing the gross motor skills segment. “You’re interesting, Levi, and I wouldn’t mind getting to know you better. There’s my name; you can ask around the club to verify I’m trustworthy if you like, and really you should. Hanji knows me pretty well. If you’d like to meet up again, feel free to call.”

Levi drains his beer. Then he pushes the glass away, gives Erwin a narrow stare. “You want me to ask around to find out all your embarrassing secrets?”

“I want you to do what’s necessary to feel that I’m trustworthy.”

Levi folds the receipt between two fingers and slips it in the pocket of his sinfully tight jeans. They’re worn white at the knees and thighs, and Erwin can imagine undoing that old brass zipper and slipping his hand inside to meet an answering heat. “This you staking a claim?”

Erwin raises a brow. “Absolutely not. Just an offer. You can take it or leave it. If you just want an ear in the scene, that’s fine by me; if you want to try a scene, well, I’d prefer that, but whatever you’re comfortable with.”

“I’ll think about it,” Levi says, and that’s Erwin’s cue to saunter off to talk to some of the old regulars. He can feel Levi’s incisive gaze on his back.

Always leave them wondering.

-

Levi hurtles upwards out of terror and into wakefulness. His hand darts, without thought, to the handgun on his nightstand.

Beretta M9. Semi-automatic. Short recoil. 15 round magazine. Not the same gun he had against the Titans - he will never have that gun again - but serviceable, more than capable of protecting him should he need it.

He swings his legs out of bed and onto the floor, toes curling against the cold. The quick, mechanical motion of field-stripping and maintaining the gun is a comfort, and while he lets his hands do as they will he looks about the room. He keeps the walls bare, has removed the door so he has a clear line of sight to the front door.

He will never be taken by surprise again.

In his cell in the Titans' base, the ceiling was sixteen tiles by twelve tiles. There was a darker gray tile four tiles down and five from the upper left corner. Thirteen of the tiles had cracks. His metal bunk was six feet long, estimating by his own stride. The handcuff that had rubbed his wrist down to the bone had seventy-five scratches on the cuff attached to the bedframe.

Across the hall-

Eren and Mikasa keep making noise about invading his apartment while he's out to decorate it (with the help of Armin's so-called exquisite taste), but there's no point. If Levi ever needs to move on, escape the nightmare hounds slaving at his heels, he will without a second thought, though he'll miss the idiots two doors down.

The red door across the hall-

He jerks himself away from the intrusive thought with an effort to look down at the Beretta. It gleams, oiled and cleaned, so he slips it in his shoulder holster and pads from the room to the kitchen, pausing halfway to look at the hole he punched into the terribly shitty drywall of the hallway. His knuckles throb beneath their bandages at the memory.

It'd been a blackout, his psychiatrist said. The reaction of a traumatized mind to a stimulus that pushed him back into that cell, and those months. The worst part is that he doesn't remember what caused it, what ordinary thing displaced him from his own body, and so he's done the sensible thing: begun to count his surroundings to keep himself anchored here.

Then the psychiatrist started warning him about developing obsessive-compulsive disorder, comorbid with his PTSD and anxiety, and stuck him on yet more anti-anxiety pills, which taste like shit and keep him from eating (like he's got any fucking weight left to lose). But he takes them anyway, because he's a dutiful soldier, though the military has no place for him anymore. They have a pension, which he takes because a near-starving childhood taught him to never give away money.

One half-cup of steel-cut oatmeal.

Three-quarters of a cup of whole milk.

Three grams cinnamon.

Five grams honey.

He stirs it with one hand, maintaining a precise fifteen revolutions per minute. It's silent in his apartment, a welcome relief after the pounding bass throb of the club for so long last night. The last hour had been making a circuit of the floor, talking to some of the regulars about that man who'd bought him an alarmingly decent beer.

Erwin Smith. Tall, blond, with the deep purple shadows beneath the eyes and the thin, stubbled face of someone recovering from a long illness. Still, there'd been a presence to him, a weight to his regard that left Levi interested in what lay beneath the mild tone, though Erwin had the gravel voice of someone used to delivering orders. Erwin Smith seemed like a banked fire, interest and consideration burning in his pale eyes. Properly provoked, he could consume, and something in Levi aches for that, to be used up, forced to forget for even a moment, remade, his broken pieces stitched together.

Besides, Hanji and the other regulars had praised the man like he hung the moon and goddamn kinky stars. Clever, cruel when desired, terribly conscientious about his partner's safety, and scrupulously honest.

The other men he's tried at the club haven't been so good, and he's becoming more fucking disappointed with every trip. They expect him to bend more than he's capable, or to give up his sight and movement, and if he could just tell them it would be easier, but the shame is inked on his back for everyone to see, a voice when he can't tell the story.

The oatmeal is ready. He eats it from a plain white bowl while washing the pot he made it in, because he has to stay busy. To be idle is to invite the memories, the thoughts-

The red door, and what lay beyond it-

He scrubs so hard he dents the pot.

-

The knock at the door startles Levi out of a half-doze, and he's out of bed with the Beretta in his hands before he even registers the fact that it's Eren's characteristic three sharp raps. Not that the Titans are foolish: they could have easily found out Eren's way of knocking, and so Levi takes the gun with him. He has to rock up onto his toes to see out the peephole - fucking tall-ass architects - but it's Eren out there, Mikasa with him.

It's the work of seconds to eject the magazine and stow the ammo away in one locker, the gun in another one, and secure them both. He checks each lock five times. Levi has always been conscientious of safety, all the more so after.

Eren grins as Levi opens the door and charges into Levi's apartment like he owns the place, all whirlwind energy and strident voice. "We're going to the club tonight, want to come with? Maybe that Erwin guy will be there, the one you were interested in?"

Mikasa follows at a more sedate pace. She snags Eren by the collar of his shirt and pulls him in, reining in his anarchic tendencies. "You've investigated him thoroughly, I assume."

Levi shrugs. "All my resources say he's clean, and the people at the club talk about him like he's Jesus, so I suppose I might."

His clothes aren't impressive enough for a night out, though: the jeans he paints in (because the therapists said he needed to express his feelings) and an old blue T-shirt, too large. Not that Eren and Mikasa are fashion plates either. Eren is utterly insensible to color and shape, and would probably go to work in bile-green and orange combined if he didn't have Mikasa to tell him when he's being a fuckhead.

Which, because he's Eren, is approximately ninety-five percent of the time.

Mikasa could dress well, if she cared, but she doesn't. She became a professional MMA competitor and trainer after she left the military, so anything she wears is liable to get blood on it at the worst, torn at the best.

Still, though. There's a part of Levi, deeply hidden and strangling, that wants to impress Erwin. Wants to be thought worthy of Erwin's regard, and praised for his loyalty and cunning. He's been out of the military three months, and he still finds himself adrift, spinning wildly

into his own memories without a fixed point to anchor himself, the rigid rules and reassuring fixity of life in barracks.

"Let me change shirts and ask Erwin if he's coming, and I'll join you."

Before they leave, Levi checks his front door is locked precisely twelve times, cursing himself with every time he has to turn back and verify - it's stupid, he's stupid, he knows he locked it but what if he didn't, what if the Titans find him, and if he doesn't complete the ritual the world will tilt on its axis - and Eren and Mikasa, because they are the ones who found him in that hallway with the red door, let him, and say nothing.

They take the subway, Mikasa and Eren subtly angling themselves to keep anyone from bumping into Levi. Levi isn't particularly edgy tonight, but when people have gotten handsy, their rough fingers brushing up against his scars, he roars to life like a wildfire and attacks like one, too. He doesn't deserve friends like them.

"You two got a plan for tonight?" Outside the station lights whip past their car in streaks of white against the darkness.

Mikasa shrugs, but Eren says, "Some dancing, and then we thought we'd check out the suspension workshop."

"Really. And which one of you chucklefucks is volunteering to get hung up by ropes?"

Mikasa and Eren frown at each other like they haven't even considered this yet, and knowing them, they might not have.

Neither one of them ever exerts real power over the other, and as far as either of them will say, they're not completely monogamous. Levi can't get his head around their dynamic and it seems pointless to try.

"Whichever one of us loses the coin flip, I guess," Eren says, then cuts through the crowd of people disembarking the subway, hauling the two of them after him.

Levi barely suppresses a shudder. Placing yourself completely in another's hands based entirely on the vagaries of luck - that happened once to him and those he loved. Never again. They emerge onto the city streets, and Mikasa tugs Levi a little closer, taking his arm (which is his arm, thank you very much) and draping it over her neck like some fleshy scarf. Levi leaves it.

The night air is cool, heavy with mist, pleasant on Levi's lungs, scarred from smoke and sand and other things, but he gets little time to enjoy it as Eren presents their membership cards to the front desk attendant and leads them into the club. It's quiet tonight, the music some slow string piece mixed with the throbbing heartbeat of a bass drum. Onstage, Hanji, dressed in something approximating a masturbatory teenager's idea of a sexy scientist, is doing something deeply unscientific to a man's cock and balls, trussed up so tight they're near-purple.

"We're going to go dance," Eren says. "You've got our numbers?"

"Of fucking course I have your numbers. How else would I be able to look at my phone whenever you text me your asinine thoughts and know instantly from whose rotting skull they came?"

Mikasa ignores his irritation, as she's so very good at doing.

"We'll be expecting your check-in at midnight."

"Fine. I'm going to go find Erwin."

"Be safe," says Eren, and suddenly he's serious, a terrible light shining in his eyes. "If we don't get your check-in, Mikasa and I will be coming for you." This is, after all, the only man the Titans fear as much as they fear Levi and Mikasa. Had feared Levi's squad-

Don't think about that.

"I will," Levi manages, and escapes toward the bar. He spots Erwin and slows his pace, approaching slowly, at an angle, along the edge of the room. He keeps his back to the wall, his gaze moving, checking jackets for the lump of a shoulder holster (there are none, he knows there are, they're banned, but he can't not check). His heart beats in his ears, and his hands clench without conscious thought. He runs the thumb of his wrapped hand over his bandaged palm, counting the number of wraps in the fabric to center himself.

Erwin's talking to the bartender, Mike, his voice a gravel rumble that Levi can feel in his bones even this far away, even though he can't quite make out the words. A black suit jacket, well-cut to emphasize those broad shoulders, the right sleeve pinned back on itself. A pale shirt, open at the collar, exposing the hollow of Erwin's throat, the hard line of his neck, his collarbones, a faint glint of golden hair. His jawline, sharp, strong, is stubbled, and Levi wants -

He wants, and he has wanted so little for so very long.

"Erwin," he says as he stops behind him.

Erwin turns. There's a heaviness to his motion, a languid certainty that he can reach out and take, can do whatever he wants, a darkness in his eyes that intensifies as he takes in Levi's appearance, assessing, appraising.

Five wraps in the bandages over the palm, two of which are fraying on the uppermost side-

"Levi," he says, and smiles, and the rushing torrent of numbers and rituals slows. He slides off the stool, gingerly, carefully, and the reminder that this man is human, more human than most, can be hurt, can lose, is a comfort. "I've got us a room. I thought you might want some privacy."

"Sounds fine." Levi falls in at Erwin's right side, careful not to walk in the space once occupied by the arm, and follows him to an inconspicuous stairway, up a flight of stairs, and into a small room: number thirty-eight.

"You have a check-in set up, I hope? What time?" Erwin's fiddling with the lights, turning them down to a soft ambient golden glow.

Levi's more interested in the room. He covers his examination by texting the room number to Eren and Mikasa. Windowless. Approximately six steps from the door to the low metal-frame bed. A white-tiled bathroom to the left. A wooden trunk at the foot of the bed. A nightstand, with a lamp on it - a weapon, if necessary, looks like steel, suitable to bludgeon - to the right of the bed. Erwin's question finally filters through the paranoia, and Levi turns to face him.

"Yes. I'm not a fool. It's at midnight."

"I never said you were a fool," Erwin says, no condescension in his tone. He takes a seat on top of the trunk. "I think you're the farthest thing from a fool it's possible to be. I'm simply checking, for my own peace of mind."

Levi bites back the annoyance pushing to be let free, and approaches, settling with ill grace at Erwin's feet. The floor is uncomfortable, but that's all he has time to register before Erwin hooks a finger beneath his chin and draws his head up, forcing Levi to meet those blue, considering eyes, looking at Levi as though they can see deep into the rotten core of him and still find him worthy.

"Why'd you do that?" A simple inquiry.

Levi shifts. "Isn't this the proper way to start? I kneel, you slap me around a bit or ask me to fuck your boot, and then we go from there? Sir."

Erwin's eyes glint like pale halogen flames, and Levi stiffens, ready for pity, ready to be looked at as some pathetic thing to be coddled. Erwin only shakes his head and sits back, letting go of Levi's chin. "No. There's no 'proper way' to start, Levi. And you don't need to call me 'sir.' We're not in scene yet, and even if we were, I only want that if you're comfortable offering it."

Erwin nods at the armchair by the door. "Why don't you have a seat there? At least for the negotiation, I'm more comfortable if we do it as equals."

Levi bristles, the tense strength in his limbs reminding him of how easy it would be to explode off this floor and drive Erwin back, show him that Levi is a threat no matter where he is, incapacitate him or worse in seconds-

Another intrusive thought, another image of violence he doesn't need to see-

He gets up off the floor and takes a seat, elbows on knees, watching Erwin watching him.

"So," Erwin says, voice thoughtful, rich with curiosity, as though Levi is something interesting or desirable, "your hard limits. What are they?"

"No humiliation. Nothing that's meant to go in a toilet." Levi swallows the bile at the image, the reminder. "No knives. Nothing that cuts off my breathing. Nothing permanent. No including others."

Erwin's gaze flickers with each thing he names, and it's a strange feeling, near-tangible, to have a man's attention so completely. "All right. My hard limits mostly align with yours, with one difference. I don't do sex on the first scene. My partner can masturbate, but I'm not a participant."

Levi raises a brow, surprised despite himself. "Thought this whole thing was about sex."

"No. It's entirely possible to have a BDSM relationship that doesn't involve sex at all. Rare, of course, but I've seen it done. I have this limit to prevent too much emotional entanglement on the first scene, since many people try out a scene and then decide it, or I'm, not for them." Erwin grins, rueful. "Saves us both some heartbreak."

"But." Levi starts, then stops, near-grinding his teeth. He wants, and yet he doesn't want to show his weakness, how easily he's undone. "You would have sex with me if we continued this," he finishes, and hates himself for the admission.

Erwin's eyes darken. Something powerful coils in him, something that prickles at Levi's skin, and Erwin's voice, when he speaks, is rough. "If you wanted it, yes. I'd have you as many ways as I could. There are so many things I want to do to you." The certainty sets Levi's bones alight, and it's a titanic effort to keep the yearning off his face. Then Erwin shakes himself, and it's that ordinary man sitting across from him, businesslike. "Soft limits?"

So much fucking negotiation. Levi wants to snap at him to get the hell on with it, but the look in Erwin's eyes, like this is something that can't be rushed because- because Levi is worth it- keeps him from snarling. "I don't want my limbs bound. With the right partner, I think I could do it, but not yet. No full-on sensory deprivation. No bondage that's impossible to escape."

"How do you feel about rope?"

Levi considers. "I'm not sure. I'm willing to try it."

"Pain?"

He has to grin at that, sharp, thin. "Good."

Erwin nods. "All right. Standard safewords, red, yellow, green?"

Levi digs his nails into his worn jeans. The precipice looms. "Fine by me."

The energy in the air changes as Erwin straightens, eyes glittering in the dim light, and Levi is transfixed. Every cell in him strains toward that certainty, the assurance that this man can hold together his broken pieces, at least for a while.

"Strip."

-

Levi rises like smoke, grace in every motion, and slips out of his leather jacket, exposing arms corded with muscle that shifts as he folds the jacket meticulously and sets it on the chair. Trying to impress Erwin perhaps, or, no, Erwin realizes as Levi takes off his belt and

folds it precisely in half, he is just that organized. Another piece in the puzzle as to why Levi is so unbending, why he can't find this on his own.

A moment, as Levi unwraps his hand. His knuckles are purple with bruising, one stitched.

Levi holds his gaze, dark eyes serious, stance and expression a challenge, measuring, as he reaches for the hem of his worn white T-shirt and draws it up and over his head.

Erwin keeps his face expressionless with an effort. His sub is held together with scars. A dark line of hair beneath his navel is bisected by an angry red patch where no hair grows. Chunks of skin and muscle have been taken from his shoulders. A thick silver sea of scarring mars his left flank, and his ribs are knotted with old breaks.

'Where have you been, Levi, that someone could do this to you?'

Levi drops his hands to the zipper of his worn jeans. The click of the metal parting is loud in the silence as he draws the tab down, waistband falling open around slender hips, the deep shadows of his bones, where Erwin's hand might fit. Levi peels the fabric down his legs, toes off his shoes, nudges them beneath the chair and folds his jeans. He's gone commando, his soft cock as slender and pale as the rest of him, and Erwin could hold him entirely in one hand.

Levi's gaze stays locked with Erwin's the entire time. He doesn't pretend shyness, doesn't cover himself, or offer an explanation of the red scars lacing up one leg in a fractal tree; the remnants of a lightning strike, or - Erwin doesn't want to think it, but he's never been in the business of denial - electricity. Jaw tense, hands at his side, he stares at Erwin, daring him to ask, to be repulsed, offering himself with no pretenses. Completely still. The stillness, the expectation of pain, is almost worse than any obvious hurt.

It is entirely possible that Erwin isn't prepared for this. That he can never be prepared for this.

Nothing worth having is ever easy. So he must earn this, must focus, must find where he can push, how much Levi is willing and able to bend. He gestures for Levi to turn, and Levi does, exposing his back. He turns his head enough to look at Erwin.

Erwin takes in a deep breath. Heat throbs low in his body. For the first time in a long while, the missing arm doesn't ache. There are more scars, and yet these Levi has made beautiful, incorporated into tattoos. A black and gold fish, glimpsed between the spaces of the thick silver net of burns splashed across one shoulder blade. A small gray and white bird perches on the branches of a red tree-scar. Beneath the tree, a golden hound slumbers, muzzle tucked into tail. A lean tabby cat pads up the jagged edges of a poorly-healed wound paralleling Levi's spine, all pride and grace.

"Stay there." Erwin gets up, certainty warming him, loosening the tension he carries, and goes to Levi. He stops just behind Levi, close enough to feel his warmth, to smell him, and rests his hand on Levi's shoulder. Tense, hard beneath his fingers, like the anticipation of danger one feels when preparing to jump, trusting the chute.

Levi leans back into him. Slight, a bare shift in position, but it's a request, and Erwin grants it. He feathers his fingers across Levi's collarbones, thumb resting in the hollow of his throat to feel the fast beat of his pulse, and draws Levi into him. He fits, dark hair tickling Erwin's chin, so slender Erwin's body encompasses him, and the recognition of the difference in their sizes makes Erwin swallow. He wants to do so many things to Levi. Wants to make him strain, cry out, puzzle out the labyrinth of his scars.

Levi stands rigid for a moment, lips white, jaw clenched. Then he pushes back, hesitant. When Erwin stands firm, he exhales, a hard expulsion of air like someone has punched him, and eases, turning his head enough for Erwin to see his expression: wiped clean, blank of thought or feeling, eyes cast down.

The surge of possession, protectiveness, surprises even Erwin, used to the instant attachment such scenes can provoke. He slides his arm across Levi's shoulders to anchor him further. His fingertip dips into the deep pit of a scar, and he closes his eyes for a moment to gather his thoughts. He wishes he didn't have to ask. But if he didn't ask, he would not be who he is.

"Levi. These scars."

"Yes." Levi's voice is harsh, bitter enough to sting. He tenses once more, hard and ready as a naked blade.

"You don't need to tell me where they come from," Erwin says, gratified by Levi's surprised inhalation. "Not unless you want to. But there's something I need you to promise me for this to be acceptable for me."

"All right," Levi says, resigned. He lifts one hand to curl about Erwin's wrist, pale against the black of Erwin's jacket. His hand is yet a danger for one so small. There are nicks and old bruises on his knuckles enough to tell.

"Promise me that you aren't using me to punish yourself. For whatever happened to give you those scars, or something in your past - I don't know. But if I'm to be a stand-in for someone who hurt you, or I'm meant to hurt you because you believe you truly deserve it, then I don't consent to that."

A silence. Levi, small and unyielding and unbroken in his arm.

"This isn't punishment." Levi's lips hardly move. His voice is a whisper, dead and quiet as ashes falling. "There were- things were done to me. This is how I become myself again."

The idea of reclaiming trauma through scenes wasn't new, but this is a level of pain he might not be able to help. Still, he'd do Levi wrong to not trust his word or self-assessment. Erwin bends his head to breathe hotly across the tip of Levi's ear, arm hard across Levi's collarbones, hand curled about one shoulder.

Levi's hand clenches about his wrist. His body is rigid, the urge to shudder at Erwin's breath ruthlessly choked. He tilts his head back enough to see Erwin out of the corner of his eye, his gaze calm, wary. "So what's the plan? Gonna push me around some? I'd let you. I might even like it."

Erwin strokes one of Levi's scars with his thumb. The skin is cold, coarse, the edges ragged with savagery. Someone has done this man a great many wrongs, and those wrongs have led Levi here, into his grip, sharp-edged, so wary that to embrace him is to embrace a knife.

"Do you truly need to know the plan, Levi?" He draws the top of Levi's ear into his mouth, nips at it, eases the hurt with a soft brush of his lips over the delicate skin. He almost manages to wring a shudder out of Levi's resistant body, and the scrape of his stubble against the side of Levi's neck makes his grip on Erwin's wrist tighten further. "Or are you so ashamed of wanting someone's touch that you want to take control back?"

Levi says nothing. The hard line of his jaw speaks for him.

"Stand there." Erwin lets go of him and moves toward the chest, pausing as he remembers something. "Turn towards me."

Levi pivots so quickly he's near a blur. He locks eyes with Erwin, nods slightly in thanks. Understandable for someone as mistrusting as he is to be relieved by being able to keep an eye on Erwin's movements. His arms are folded behind his back in military stance, chin lifted.

Erwin opens the chest and withdraws a long coil of rope: hemp, rough, dyed black. Enough rope for a simple harness; he doesn't want to push too hard, not when Levi's working so hard to trust him.

Levi's eyes darken with every step Erwin takes toward him. The muscles of his upper arms shift, as though he's winding tight, explosive, anxious violence contained by force of will. His palpable danger makes Erwin's blood heat, the urge to gentle and tame and bend to his will near tangible.

Erwin shakes the rope out, the flat slap of it on the wooden floor loud in the silence, and pulls the center of it up over Levi's head, settling it at the nape of his neck. His dark hair is surprisingly soft against Erwin's wrist. The two strands of rope hang loose over his chest, the touch of it against his skin pulling his nipples up into two tight pink pebbles, just waiting for Erwin's mouth or hand.

Levi breathes out once, hard, a warm exhalation against Erwin's chest, and tilts his head back to look Erwin in the eyes. There's a yearning in that dark gaze that Levi might not understand yet, a plea to be overwhelmed and shattered, to give over his fear and anger, and Erwin wants, so terribly badly, to give him that.

It's only then that Erwin realizes that he can't tie the necessary knots one-handed. Self-recrimination rises thick and acid in his throat - stupid, how can he hope to control anyone if he can't even tie a knot, much less hold someone down - but he readjusts after a moment of blank misery. He's adaptable. He'll survive.

"You're going to tie the knots," he says, and is proud that his voice betrays nothing. Really, though, this is better. This makes Levi complicit in his own bondage, every knot a sign of his willing submission.

"Clever," Levi says. He unbends enough to reach for the ropes, and looks to Erwin for direction, this savage creature held willingly captive.

"Tie one here." Erwin runs one callused finger up Levi's sternum, taps the sweet hollow between his collarbones. One day he'll lay his own mark there, the center of a necklace of bruises from his mouth. "And here." He spans his hand between Levi's nipples, circles his thumb outward over scars and soft skin. The press of his thumbnail into that rose pebble wrings a shudder - a small shiver, fought back near-instantly- from Levi, whose hands falter in their work.

Sensitive. Good. Erwin does so like clamps.

"Here." Just beneath the sternum, in the soft valley between the ribs, Erwin scratches once, hard, thin lines of red rising in his wake.

Levi gasps, a low, drawn out hiss, rocks forward, recovers.

"Here." Erwin indicates three more spots for Levi to tie knots, and turns back to the chest. He selects a few black zip ties and sets them aside on the chair atop Levi's clothes. Levi's done the knots, and now waits. There's sweat gathering at his temples, the first hints of a flush on his sharp cheekbones.

"Good," Erwin says. "Very good."

Levi's hands, loose at his sides, curl. He licks his lips, and at that unconscious seduction Erwin can't wait any longer. He cups his hand about Levi's head and bends to kiss him.

Levi is no passive ingénue; he opens to Erwin instantly, near-devours him, straining upwards onto his toes for more sensation. Still, he's clever, leaves his hands at his side, only the way he bites Erwin's lip telling of his fight for control.

Erwin closes his fingers into a fist, yanks Levi's head back, and when Levi gasps, an involuntary cry, Erwin strikes again, kissing him hard, tightening his grip further and pulling every time Levi tries for control. He will have Levi quiet and easy by the end of this night.

Levi learns, sinks back down onto his feet, and allows Erwin free reign.

"Good," Erwin whispers against his panting mouth, brushes his lips across the red stain on his cheekbones. Levi's eyelashes flicker. He sways forward, unconscious, and catches himself, manages not to betray his own surrender.

Erwin picks up the two ropes, and in one sudden motion runs them between Levi's legs, the black hemp a tempting sight against the rose flush of Levi's half-hard erection, and up, between his cheeks, along his spine. At the tug of rope against delicate skin, Levi hisses between his teeth, a thin sound, and clenches his hands into fists.

Erwin passes the ropes over his shoulder. "Hold this."

Levi does, allowing Erwin to run a proprietary hand down the range of his spine. The textures of scar tissue - smooth, rough, ridged- pass beneath his fingers, and as he passes the curling

end of the tabby cat's tail, he digs his nails in and scratches hard horizontally.

Levi jerks. The rope pulls taut, abrading his most sensitive parts, cutting white into the soft rise of the base of his spine, and he hisses again, yet refuses to reach for Erwin, or loosen the rope.

"You're a slut for pain, aren't you," Erwin says, fond despite himself, resting his hand on Levi's ass. He digs his fingers in hard and pulls, exposes Levi's entrance, tiny, red, abraded raw by the rough kiss of the hemp.

Levi turns his head enough to glare. His dazed eyes, soft with want, betray him. "You got a fascination with my ass?"

The crack of Erwin's hand on pale skin rings loud. The red hand print is already rising as Erwin hits him again. "I do have a fascination," he says, rubbing one calloused thumb against Levi's hole, hot and puffy. "I'd kiss you here, fuck you with my tongue until you whine, until you beg me to stop. Force you open on plugs and dildos and vibrators, keep you there, stretched wide, push my fingers in until you're gasping, until I can get my whole hand in there, and you'd love it, I'd make you love it."

Levi moans, a hurting, harsh noise, and rocks back, gasping, pulling the rope tighter. "Hit me again, come on-"

He quiets as Erwin rests his fingers lightly along the column of his throat, shudders as Erwin bends to whisper in his ear,

"You mark so beautifully, and you love all the hurt I give you, don't you? You'd let me turn you black and blue, because you want it that badly, you dirty beautiful thing."

Silence. Levi keeps the rope taut, avoids Erwin's eyes. He's suddenly rigid, and worry threatens to choke Erwin.

"Color," Erwin says as he grabs two zipties.

"Green." He says it like it hurts, the word hard and cold as stone.

Erwin has to trust him. He marks the knots with zipties he trims with safety shears, not remarking on the heavy weight of Levi's sac on the back of his wrist as he marks a knot between cock and balls, or the way Levi's slender, pretty cock jumps and lets loose another pearl of slick as Erwin's forearm brushes it.

"Tie knots where I've tied the zipties."

Levi obeys, and hands the ropes back to Erwin without a word. He groans again and rocks up onto his toes as Erwin settles the knot in between his cock and balls and runs the two strands to either side of his sac, creating a crude ring. The hemp is rough, scratches his delicate white skin pink and red, yet the jut of his cock is proof of his masochism.

The last knot settles just above Levi's entrance, and Erwin presses it inward just a bit with his thumb. He'd never push it in, not now, when Levi's still untried and not exclusive, but the

threat, or promise, can be enough.

Levi's stiff, still, silent. His soft panting is the only sound in the room, the only sound that breaks the rush of Erwin's blood in his ears.

"Yes?"

Levi swallows. His voice is hoarse. "Yes."

Erwin kisses his shoulder, can't not. "You're lovely," he whispers, and twists the knot, moves it to and fro until Levi's skin is red, raw, so hot he can nearly feel it. "Perhaps some time I'll push this inside you, pull it back out, 'til you're crying with it, you wanton."

Levi's toes curl, his fingers, too, until his arms are corded and tense with strain. He shudders.

Erwin leaves the knot there and pulls the rope up over Levi's spine. "Arms back. Hold these."

Levi obeys, reaching behind himself to keep the ropes in position next to each other as Erwin picks up the first of the black zip ties he's put aside. He loops it behind the ropes and ties it off in an ersatz knot, then tugs the right rope free from Levi's fingers and passes it around his side, then the left. "Pull these through the lowest section of rope, then pass them back to me."

The room is quiet, Erwin's focus narrowed down to the ropes and Levi, willingly pliant in his hands. For the first time since the scene's begun, he isn't thinking about his missing arm, the absence, all the ways he'd once had to act that he will never have again. This is a place where he's whole, where Levi helps him to feel whole, and that trust is such a gift. When Levi gives him back the ropes, he pulls them tight, and the first set of diamonds in the harness flower over Levi's sides, the black rope's contrast against his pale skin making Erwin's hand clench.

He kisses the back of Levi's ear, and in silence they work together to finish the harness. Erwin ties it off at the neck, and steps back, resting a proprietary hand just above the knot. "Good?" he asks in a low murmur.

Levi's nod is slow, a little dazed.

When Erwin steps around to face him, Levi gazes at him with such calmness, that terrible ferocity in his expression muted if only for a moment. He's standing loose now, relaxed into the harness, as if the ropes hold him up, together. His mouth shines soft, lips red. He's hard, a delicate pink shading to deep rose, and Erwin's mouth waters. Still, he has his scruples, and so turns back to the trunk. There's several sets of clothespins tied onto lengths of cord, and these he lifts into the air for Levi to look at.

Levi swallows. "Yes. Please."

Erwin grins and kisses him again, and Levi lets him, holds still, arms at his side, following his lead.

"Pinch there." He taps the skin above Levi's right hipbone, and as Levi does, sets the first clothespin about the thin fold of skin and muscle and eases his grip. The wood tips close, and Levi hisses, fingers shaking.

"Color?"

"Green," Levi whispers, and without prompting pinches the section of skin above his left hipbone and offers it for the next clip.

Erwin smiles. The part of him that gets off on control, on making someone hurt because they want it, rolls in savage delight low in his belly.

Levi's breathing, controlled, kept even with an effort, fills his ears as he builds twin vertical lines of clothespins up Levi's sides, between the ropes. Why Levi feels the need to hold on, to impress even at this point, is beyond him.

"Levi."

Levi blinks, looks at him with undisguised annoyance, and if Erwin's knocked him out of the beginnings of a drop he will just have to go home and flagellate himself. Still, Levi says nothing, only arches an eyebrow.

"I don't want, or need, you to control yourself." He flicks one of the clothespins for emphasis, and a shiver runs hard up Levi's spine, peters out in the twitch of his mouth, the blink of his eyes. "You can endure pain, you've shown that. If I were to cane you, clamp you, I don't doubt you'd endure it, but I don't want you to endure it. I want you to know you, better than you know yourself, know exactly what you look like when I touch you, and when it hurts, I want you to show me."

Levi tenses, hunches into himself, fingers curled into fists. A weapon again, his gaze swarming with demons. He swallows. "Yellow," he spits, and nearly sags, as if to betray himself even that much drains him.

Someone has hurt him. Someone has taught him that to show even an ounce of hurt is to open himself for more pain than he can bear, and Erwin wants, even more than before, to win his trust, to prove himself worthy.

He steps back behind him, chest to back, and closes his fingers about the top of one of the ropes holding the line of clothespins together. He pushes his knee between Levi's, and Levi gasps, scrambles onto his toes, a shocked sound, grabs backward for his shirt and rocks down onto his thigh, rope scraping against his trousers.

"Want to come?"

"Yes," Levi hisses, head tilted back against Erwin's chest, eyes closed, teeth bared in savagery, some strange and terrible creature caught in his power.

"Right hand on the top of that line of pins. Left hand on your cock. I'm going to start pulling the left ones off, and with every one I pull, you do the same. If you can't come before I pull the last one off, I'll send you home aching." Erwin waits a beat, then asks, "Color?"

Levi's slender hips grind back into him, Levi's voice a wild snarl of, "Green, green, green, you fucker-"

The first pin rips free of his skin, leaving a deep red bruise behind, and Levi groans. He tears the right pin off, and strokes his cock slowly, head peeking between pale slick fingers. His eyes press tight, mouth half-open, hips twisting as the pain builds and crests.

Erwin tears the next one free.

It takes Levi a moment to catch up, fingers fumbling, a thin, high sound pushing free of his control, but he gets the next clip off, and his hand darts to Erwin's side once more, slender fingers digging into his hip in a bid for stability, reassurance. He keeps stroking himself, faster, sharp breaths beating hot against Erwin's chest. A red flush spreads down his neck, stains his sharp cheekbones, and Erwin would bend him over right here, spread him open, lick into him until he's sobbing with it-

"Hand on the clip, Levi," Erwin says, stern, and digs his fingernails into the stretched-thin skin around the second-to-last clothespin.

Levi swallows, forces his mouth shut, his panting inhalations hissing through his nose. He obeys with shaking fingers.

"Good." Erwin rewards him with a slow kiss to the ear, stubble scraping against the delicate skin of his neck, and as Levi relaxes, the pain ebbs, tears the pin free.

Levi follows, a hoarse shout ringing in the still air of the room. He trembles in Erwin's grip, not writhing even though he's near-vibrating with the need to twist, to move. The hand on his cock stutters, the heel of his palm bruising where it digs into the top of Erwin's thigh.

"Last one." A few moment's wait, so the pain melds, builds to a roaring crescendo. Then he pulls it off Levi's hip.

The ropes of clothespins clatter to the floor, and Levi freezes. His hand tightens on himself, and he comes, near-silent, stiff in Erwin's grip, eyes blind and beautiful. Then, on a hoarse sigh, he collapses into Erwin's chest, lax hands fumbling at his sides to hold himself up.

Erwin gets his arm about Levi's shoulders and half-guides, half-carries him to the bed, lays him down on his side, and undoes the slipknot about the rope circling his throat with shaking fingers.

Levi half-curls into himself, then stills, breaths controlled once more.

Erwin nearly reaches out to touch, then stills. Possibly he doesn't want to be held yet, or ever. Instead, Erwin busies himself with the safety scissors, cutting the zip ties and undoing the harness. The red imprints left in the rope's wake are beautiful, though he's not surprised - Levi seems made for ropes, for the red marks of hand and mouth and tools.

Levi moves sluggishly to help, half-rolling onto his front so Erwin can pull the rope free of him and toss it to one side for the cleaners, then back onto his side. Like this, he seems fragile, small and slender and vulnerable, though he may not want to seem so.

Erwin lies down behind him, propping his head up on one arm, and says nothing for a bit, letting Levi get himself together.

At last, Levi rouses enough to roll to face him, gaze blurred. He rests one thin hand in the center of Erwin's chest, and that small, solitary sign of trust makes Erwin's eyes burn.

"Not bad," Levi says, ironic, soft, and then lapses into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Title from Vienna Teng's 'Never Look Away.' Comments, kudos, bookmarks, and criticism are adored. Talk to me on Bluesky [here](#) (18+ only) or check out my other social media [here](#) if you'd like.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Levi had slept like the dead for ten minutes. He'd come awake with a jerk, ready to fight, aware instantly that this was not his bedroom, his only safe place, and found only Erwin staring back at him, concerned. Luckily the man knew better than to push, and so he'd only watched as Levi got dressed, moving to speak only as Levi tugged his jacket on.

"Is this how you like your aftercare?"

Levi had nodded and started for the door, pausing as Erwin said,

"Please call or text me in the morning. I need to know you're all right, that I haven't gone too far."

Levi had rolled his shoulders, savoring the dull ache of the rope marks. "You didn't," he had said, and gone to meet Eren and Mikasa. Only when he had gotten home, safe in his room with the lights on, gun by his side, had he allowed himself to shake himself to pieces, cold, wrapped in all his blankets.

Alone.

-

He's at his battered kitchen table, ruminating over the outline of a future painting on the canvas, when his phone vibrates in his pocket. Wonderful. Probably Erwin worrying, and just when he's finally steeled himself to creep about the edges of his memories.

Still, he fishes it out and flips it open, because he'd liked Erwin. Liked the way Erwin touched him, confidently, possessively, like he was something valued for its strength, something that wouldn't break. Liked how easily he visited pain on him, the wolfish shine of his eyes as he bound Levi still with rope and words.

'All right? I greatly enjoyed scening with you last night. If you'd like to play again or go out some time, please let me know.'

He crumbles the charcoal in his left hand while he thinks. Part of him is annoyed at the presumption that he wouldn't be all right, that he's so fragile as to require being checked up on, but this is part of the scene. He's not effusive, not the sort to describe his feelings on the matter or thank Erwin for his attention, and he won't be so false. *'I'm fine,'* he taps out, and sets the phone back down.

His next therapy appointment at the veteran's hospital is in two days, and he'd like to have something new to show. He can't think of what to draw.

The cell had been pitch-black. A hum had droned constantly from a vent low on the right wall, so loud it had nearly drowned out all thought, his squad's voices. There had been no clocks, no windows, and time had stretched into an endless waste.

The thin yellow shaft of light as the cell door opened, the way it glittered on Petra's remaining eye. Gray streaks on the eyelid, where blood had mixed with dust and dried.

The bile-green streak of hurt as he'd reached for Gunter's hand, after they brought him from the place beyond the red door, and the open wound of his wrist had bit against the handcuff.

The stench of blood and vomit and shit.

He startles awake again as the phone vibrates.

'Thanks for letting me know. I get upset if I'm not sure my partner's fine.'

God, could the man be any more honorable? He wouldn't have lasted a day in special operations. Theirs had been a particular sort of honor, a malleable one, with only one hard rule. You did not betray your mission.

He's cold. The silence swells in his ears. He wants to be outside of these memories, this body, this mind with its fractures. He wants Erwin's hand, warm, rough, yet without cruelty, back on his shoulder, anchoring him to his skin. Pulling him back from Petra's empty stare, Auruo's broken mouth.

Before he can talk himself out of it, he reaches for the phone again.

'I'm curious about impact play. Do you have a flogger?'

Sickness rises in his chest. He shouldn't be doing this. He shouldn't be involving anyone in his life. Not when he remains the only person to have been captured by the Titans as an enemy combatant and survive. Not when they want him dead, and when they might be willing to kill people in their way. Eren and Mikasa are strong - Eren is a former Titan, the only one to ever leave the organization - he doesn't have to worry about them, but Erwin is honorable. He lunges for the phone again to say something, to take back the message, but it's already vibrating.

'I do,' Erwin says. 'I have a fair number of impact toys. I'd love to try them on you. You took the marks from the rope so wonderfully, I can imagine how beautiful you'd be after a spanking.'

No one has ever called Levi beautiful. He has been called many things - a vicious, cold little cur, hard, bitter, utterly lacking in book smarts- but never beautiful.

He's frozen, staring at the phone. Petra had asked him in the dark, in the last hours after they brought her back one final time from beyond the red door, not to let this harden him. Not to give up on life. Not to let the Titans rule him. He reaches for it.

It jumps against his fingers, and there's Erwin's name on the screen. Another text. *'I'd like to get coffee or dinner before a scene, though. If you're all right with that.'*

Levi's life is so circumscribed. He goes to the hospital once a week. Once in a while he goes out with Eren and Mikasa, who've taken him on as some sort of charity case. Otherwise he's in this apartment, with its bare white walls, its lights always on, its silence, its as near to sterile as possible surfaces. This is safety. This is a coffin. Outside the world whirls on, an uncontrolled torrent where the Titans might hide, and he doesn't know how to face it. Anxiety is a thick black sludge in his veins, and he controls the yawning agony of the unknown by remaining in these small boundaries he's made.

Here Erwin is, chipping at his walls, trying to earn his trust. So few people see him as worthy of anything at all, and he can't-

Petra's voice, faltering, 'Don't let this destroy you, corporal-'

He won't.

His thumb drifts across the pad. *'Yes. Tell me when and where.'*

The certainty is comforting. Given coordinates, a time, an objective, he had once been the terror of the Titans' organization. He knows how to operate within those constraints.

It's just a shame he hasn't figured out yet how to operate in life.

-

Erwin has chosen a hole-in-the-wall bar known for good beer and better burgers for their dinner. He might, in his own head, think of it as a date, but Levi hasn't made it known whether he wants something serious, and Erwin wouldn't push it on him.

Levi slides into the booth across from him, breaking Erwin's study of the menu, and takes the one the waiter hands him. He's in a gray sweater that looks far too large, and it makes Erwin want to tug him close. "Evening," he says to Erwin, storm-gray eyes flicking to Erwin's belt, his shoulder where he had once carried a holster, marking the positions of the steak knives, the doors.

He's so ready, at every moment, to defend himself. To fight back like a cornered animal. It seems impossible for anyone to be so ready to react constantly and not break, but if there's one thing Erwin's learned about Levi so far, it's that he's not easy to break. Not even when every tense line of his body screams how much he needs to be forced to do so.

Levi studies the menu with a frown. "The hell is pommes frites?"

Erwin laughs, can't not at Levi's annoyed eyebrow raise. "French fries. The chef here can get enamored with himself sometimes, but he does make some of the best burgers in the city."

"Sounds like he's got his head up his own ass. The fuck do I care whether my cheese is hand-sprinkled?" Levi scans the menu one more time, then closes it with a snap and fixes Erwin with his gaze. "You can pick for me. You can pick the beer, too. I know jack about pairings." His jaw is a hard line, but there's a sudden beguiling shyness to the way he visibly struggles not to redden at the power he's dropped into Erwin's lap.

Oh. Erwin smiles and reaches across the table to where Levi's fingers are tangled with each other. He eases one hand out and traps it beneath his grip, swallowing it up. "I'll do my best to pick something you'll like, Levi." He curls his fingers against Levi's palm.

Levi shivers.

"And thank you."

Erwin's as good as his word. He orders Levi something similar to the beer he had at the club and one of the less out-there meals, and after the waiter is gone, there's a moment of silence before he asks,

"What did you do in the army?"

Levi pulls his hand back from Erwin's grip and straightens. "Special operations. We mostly worked in covert missions and intelligence-gathering against the Titans."

That explains some of Levi's caginess, the dangerous way he carries himself. Only the best of the best are pulled for special operations, and only the best of those are chosen to fight the Titans. Most of them don't survive.

"I worked Titan intelligence, too. Analysis, though," Erwin said, and Levi blinks, expression coming alive with interest.

"I thought you were an airborne instructor."

"I was. Before that I worked in the Titan analysis detachment. That's where I met Hanji, actually. We could only work in that division for ten years before getting rotated out; the data we were analyzing was so disturbing that they felt it impossible for anyone to be useful past ten years." Erwin frowns down at his beer. "We tried to understand them. To figure out where they originated from."

"You failed," Levi says, and for all his blunt words there's sympathy in his eyes.

"Most terrorist groups, there's a profile their members fit: age, sex, religion. The Titans could be anyone. Everyone. There's no central body, no commanders. Unlike every other group we know of, there's no ideology. They're not fighting for anything beyond hurting others, making the world burn. At any moment, any person on the planet can decide to join them, and kill someone, or blow up a bank."

Erwin shakes his head. The same old frustration weighs heavy on his shoulders. The helplessness reminds him why he left. "They're like a virus. We can study what they do, but we can't cure them."

Levi nods, then takes the beer and plate the waiter hands him.

Erwin starts on his own meal, watching Levi take a sip of his beer and raise a brow, impressed despite himself. The expression he makes on taking a bite of his burger is near-orgasmic. Erwin might possibly need to adjust his pants. He adores this, taking care of someone, figuring them out, giving them what they need and don't know they need.

"Good?"

Levi swallows, then glares. "You smarmy fuck, you've ruined me for any other hamburgers."

Erwin grins. "I'm sorry I'm not sorry."

Levi, too busy eating to speak, replies with lifted middle finger.

They pass pleasant minutes eating, interspersed with discussions of their military memories. Apparently basic is just as hellish no matter who you are, whether an upper-class bored college student or a former juvenile delinquent. Levi only eats half of his burger and fries, though, and Erwin frowns.

"Not hungry?" He'd noticed how thin Levi is, and he wonders why. Illness?

"No." Levi looks away. He is unassailable, remote, and Erwin wishes he could make him understand that he doesn't need to be, that he can allow the world in without pain. "I have." He stops.

"You don't need to tell me if you don't want to. This isn't a scene, and even if it were, I'd do you wrong to force you to tell me anything you want to keep to yourself," Erwin says, gentle.

Levi sneers, rich with self-disgust. "I get that. I want to tell you." His jaw clenches. When he speaks, he sounds defeated. "Some of my medications suppress the appetite." He glances at Erwin, thin face blank, expecting nothing.

Erwin doesn't know why Levi thinks he should be surprised. Anyone who carries the amount of scars Levi does probably has PTSD. "I take medications myself, you know."

Levi blinks, frowns, and Erwin's just glad to see some expression on his face. "I didn't. You seem so put-together."

Erwin laughs. "You can credit the hospital, my psychiatrist, and Hanji for that. And some pill bottles." When Levi colors and looks down at his half-full plate, Erwin's heart twists, and he leans forward to lay his hand on Levi's, curled around his beer. "I wasn't laughing at you. Never at you. Would you like to get a to-go box and head to the club or my place?"

Levi stills. Then, slow, hesitant, he turns his hand over within Erwin's grip and curls his fingers about Erwin's.

"Yours."

-

The drive back to Erwin's house is quiet. Levi moves only to text the address to Eren and Mikasa, and then sits still, hands folded in his lap. He checks every so often to make sure no one is following them, but otherwise his attention is on Erwin's face, the sharp line of his stubbled jaw, the blue glint of his eyes flaring and subsiding into the dark as they pass each streetlight. The silence is electric. The soft touch of his worn sweater itches at his over-sensitized skin. His mouth is dry, his heart a thunderous drumbeat in his ears. He's half-hard

already, want a near-tangible thing, and when he blinks the darkness behind his eyelids is alive with the image, the memory, of Erwin's hand cracking down on his ass.

Then, as they wait to make the left turn into a subdivision, Erwin turns, reaches across the space between them, and cups Levi's cock. Proprietary, possessive, casual, as though he's always known that Levi is his. His thumb traces the line of his zipper, presses the metal teeth into Levi's skin.

Levi's toes curl in his boots. Warmth races up his spine. He rocks up into Erwin's hand, eyes slipping closed, and sighs into the dark silence. His back arches as Erwin's grip tightens, thumb pulling the rough fabric of his jeans across him, an abrasion that sets his nerves alight.

Then Erwin, the absolute, awful bastard, slides his hand off him and back onto the steering wheel to make his turn.

Levi may just murder him in his sleep. He says nothing, though, and marks the turns they make through the quiet darkness, inscribing them on his mental map of the city. If he needs to escape, needs to tell Erwin how to flee the Titans, he'll need to know this.

Erwin parks in front of a small two-story house, six windows visible, one front door, backyard opening straight onto the alley. If necessary, the quickest and safest exit strategy would be to leave from the back and run through the alleys-

"Come." Erwin opens the door and gets out, and Levi, mute, anticipatory, follows him to the front door. On the way, Erwin's arm steals about his shoulders, fingers curling about his bicep and tightening for just a moment.

He follows Erwin inside, and as Erwin closes and locks the front door, slides to his knees.

Erwin turns back, sees him, and looks at him without surprise, fondness in the fine lines about his eyes. He sets the keys aside on the side table – a part of Levi relaxes, now that the potential weapons are out of his hand - and curls his fingers about Levi's chin. "Very good," he says, and Levi has to tell him.

Levi gazes up at Erwin from the floor, and finds no anger in Erwin's face, no cruelty in the press of Erwin's fingers at his jaw. "I need you to know something. Before you decide I'm worth taking on. I-" he swallows, tries to look away, but Erwin's grip tightens, and he's caught. Allowed himself to be caught. He could safeword, could refuse to be held, could run and never see Erwin again, but he chooses this. "I respect you too much to place you in danger without you knowing. You deserve to know." It seems impossible for anything to endanger Erwin, as tall and strong and commanding as he is, the only man Levi thinks might be capable of handling him, and yet. And yet Levi knows the Titans.

"Tell me," Erwin says, the low edge of his voice making Levi shudder. "Though I think there aren't many things that could make me give you up." The edge of his thumbnail digs into his cheekbone, leaves a red warmth in its wake. "Not when you're so beautiful."

"You're too confident." Levi gazes straight into his eyes. "I'm on the Titans' shit list. I'm not their highest-priority target by far, but if someone decides to turn me into the organization, or

they think they can get to me through you, your association with me will endanger you. I'm sorry I didn't tell you before."

Erwin's expression shifts, subtle, but there, and he strokes Levi's cheek, the red mark there, and curls his fingers lightly about the back of Levi's neck. A minute passes. Then he seems to make a decision, his jaw firming. "Why do they want you?"

Levi closes his eyes, fists his hands in his jeans. He holds himself rigid, ice, metal, unbending, forces the shivers that threaten to overwhelm him down. "I."

They had shivered together, in the unending darkness. Had pressed dirty skin to dirty skin and held each other. Had shared the last of their warmth, had held onto Gunter even as he went cold and still forever.

"Levi." The clench of Erwin's fingers about the back of his neck jerks him out of it, and he opens his eyes to find Erwin on his knees before him, his face very close, his breath warm and alive against his skin. "Levi, what is it?"

"I survived," Levi says, and there's no victory in it, only the hollow expanse of the years still to come without the people he loved most.

Erwin's expression is drawn, and a part of Levi wonders how terrible he must look for Erwin to be so concerned. "Are you sure you want to do a scene tonight? If you're not in a good frame of mind-"

Levi gets his hand in Erwin's shirt and twists it, dragging him close, though the brute strength in Erwin's frame makes it clear that he's letting himself be moved, expression near-amused. Levi wants to bite him.

He settles for snarling, "I want this. You wound me up in the car, you're dealing with me after. So get to it, asshole." He freezes, realizing just what he's said, and his nerves scream. He braces. His body sings electric with threat, every breath and bone in him on edge. He waits for the hand to settle on his neck, to fist in his hair, to slap towards his cheek. He waits for his body to react without his consent, to grab Erwin's hand and break his fingers, to bull forward into Erwin's chest and drive knee or elbow into his throat-

Erwin's hand comes up.

He watches it move, fascinated despite himself. The world is in slow motion, the moment before his explosion into self-defense elongating into eternal torment. Yet that rough, blunt hand comes, cups his face with such appalling gentleness, thick thumb stroking the line of his cheekbone, the deep shadows beneath his eyes that tell of his nightmares.

Pain is easy. He's known pain, accepted pain, embraced it as an old and beloved friend, a constant companion. He has no idea how to accept gentleness.

Erwin's rough thumb slides across his lower lip, and Erwin's face is very close. The warm light of the lamp glitters on the fine golden hairs above his lip, picks out the dark lines in his irises. His eyes follow the slow caress of his thumb, patient, assessing, sure. The edge of his

thumbnail catches on the spots where Levi's chewed his upper lip, and pain flowers red and warm.

Levi is brutally aware of what most tops would expect here. For him to open his lips, turn his head, draw Erwin's thumb into his mouth with his tongue and suck in a pantomime of a blowjob- nausea roils in his gut at the image, the idea of grease and bacteria and all the filth of human skin brought inside. The cell, the stink- He compromises by turning his head into Erwin's hand, half-shuts his eyes as he lets his neck go loose. It's a struggle to let the tension seep from him.

Erwin cradles his head and traces the shadow beneath his eye. He looks greedy, intent, and Levi shivers despite himself. To be desired like this, consumed - it frightens him and makes him want all at once.

"Come with me." Erwin rocks back on his heels and stands. He offers his hand to help Levi up.

Levi takes it, if only for the pleased smile it gets him, and follows Erwin into the living room. It's a peaceful place, done in cream and brown, with books piled into messy stacks on the coffee table and a set of vinyl records decorating one wall.

"Hanji got those for me," Erwin says with a half-embarrassed smile. He settles into an overstuffed leather armchair. "She said that as a kinky gay man I had to have Depeche Mode prominently displayed."

"Nice stereotype." Levi hovers before the chair. Should he kneel? Should he sit on the couch?

"She was being ironic." Erwin rolls his eyes, but his grin remains. "Ironically sincere, I think. I've given up on deciphering her layers." He reaches out, settles his hand on Levi's hip, and pulls him in, and Levi goes, straddling Erwin's thighs. His hands he wraps about Erwin's shoulders: strong, broad, and very warm. It's ridiculous of him to characterize anybody as safe, when he knows how easily bodies can be broken, hurt, made to betray, yet if he were so stupidly maudlin he might call Erwin's easy strength safe.

"What do you want to do to me?" This question never goes over well. Some of his former partners look at it as an attempt to take back control, to top from the bottom, and others will answer the question but then realize how difficult he is, how much careful handling he requires, and turn away.

Erwin says nothing for a moment. His hand is a welcome weight on Levi's hip, thumb stroking over the cut of his hipbone. He studies Levi, and it puts his hackles up, has him shifting, tensing. Erwin's grip tightens, thumb pressing bruises into his skin, and holds him there.

"Why do you need to know?"

The words stick in Levi's throat. What words can hold even the barest outline of what the Titans did? How they'd broken them down and pushed them into the filth. How clothes and skin had begun to rot because they were denied showers.

Now free, he showers every six hours. This is progress, and he hates that it's progress, that he can have been so broken as to consider that better. And to be touched, to have Erwin's hand, his fingers, invading him, he has to be clean, has to-

He can't think about it any longer, because he can feel the panic waiting, the images looming.

Erwin says nothing. He's so fucking patient. The warm pulse of the bruise on Levi's hip where his thumb presses holds him here. To be thought worthy of waiting for, to have his words taken at face value: it's an alien experience. Nearly every time Levi has run into authority, they've refused to believe him, when he's a cur from the wrong side of town, runs with the wrong sort, has a record as long as his arm. The military only took him because of his skills. Had he been softer, a weaker fighter, he would've been tossed into prison. Yet Erwin acts like he's worth listening to.

Levi comes at it from the side. "If we're going to fuck, or you want to finger me – I need a shower. And I." He can't say it. Humiliation prickles on his cheeks. "Inside," he manages.

"Ah." Erwin's hand slides slow up his back, nails dragging across his scars, and rests at the back of his neck. His fingers curl lightly about Levi's throat. "You don't need to be ashamed. There's almost nothing you can tell me I haven't already heard." He leans back in his chair, looks at Levi like a puzzle, something valuable to be understood. "You were very brave to tell me. If you can tell me, is this- do you need this because of something that happened to you?"

Levi freezes. "Yellow."

Erwin tilts his head. If he's annoyed or pitying he doesn't show it, thank fuck. "All right. After you have a shower and an enema, what do you want out of tonight? You mentioned being curious about impact play, and fingering or fucking. Do you want those?"

"Are we going to negotiate this much every time? Because this is going to get fucking boring. Aren't you going to decide what you want me to do?" Erwin's grip tightens, and Levi winces at the dull thud of pain that curls warm and welcoming about his spine.

"Until I'm confident I can give you what you want without this much negotiation, yes." Erwin's voice is hard, and Levi can finally see the military commander within him. The urge to stand to attention and salute itches at his bones. "And yes, there are things I want from you, and I'll figure out how to incorporate those into our scenes. This is a collaboration, Levi. Ideally, we both get what we want."

It's been a long damn time since Levi's gotten what he wants. The idea of asking, and getting just that, is foreign, and he despises the uncertainty in his voice. "I'd like to try hand spanking, paddling, flogging."

"Those, we can do." Erwin smiles, slow and sure. Consideration glitters in his eyes. His voice is low, graveled, dark and rich as charcoal, makes Levi shiver. "If I want to finger you tonight? Fuck you with my fingers until you lose control, make you come over and over again until you're sobbing?"

Levi's hips buck entirely without his consent. His erection rubs against the flat plain of Erwin's belly, zipper cutting into the thin skin, and he hisses, barely holding back a whine. "Yes. Please. If you use gloves."

Erwin's gaze sharpens. His attention burns Levi's skin like a heated needle. "Good. Go take a shower. Bathroom's in the hallway behind you, master bedroom's at the end. The enema kit's beneath the sink. When you're done, leave your clothes off and come find me in the bedroom."

As Levi slides off his knees and turns, Erwin adds one last caveat. "When you're done, crawl."

-

Levi scrubs himself until his skin is near-raw - ten minutes - filches some of Erwin's mouthwash and toothpaste to clean his mouth - sixty seconds for both - uses the kit beneath the sink - five minutes. Clean, at last, free for a moment of the intangible marks the Titans left on him, beneath his skin. The memories that clamor and press at the edges of his consciousness recede.

The world is quiet. He dries himself with one of the dark blue towels on the rack, enamored despite himself with the deep, well-worn softness of it. It's expensive but not gaudy, bespeaks Erwin's good taste. Dry, he folds it until the edges and corners align precisely and sets it atop the toilet seat.

A moment's contemplation. It's not parallel to the walls. It shouldn't matter, it's just a fucking towel, the placement of a shitty piece of fabric compared to plaster shouldn't freak him out-

He straightens it. Fixes a corner. Acceptable. Then he goes to the doorway and sinks to his hands and knees, crawls down the hallway towards the open door of the bedroom. His knees sink into the deep pile of the carpet. Erwin probably wouldn't ask him to crawl in the kitchen, on tile; he seems too kind for that. There's a core of steel to him that Levi could excavate, if he wanted, if he pushed hard enough. Not tonight, though. Tonight he's in a good mood. He's settled in his skin, doesn't need pain to push him out of his head and into his body.

The bedroom's like the rest of the house: understated, in clean lines and neutral colors. A massive bed dominates the room, the only concession to Erwin's kinks two iron rings sunk into the wall beside the headboard. A large window to the right looks out into the backyard, and beyond that a six-foot-fence, easily scaled if necessary.

Erwin's sitting on the edge of the bed, his feet bare, strangely pale against the deep blue of his jeans. His eyes glitter, the blatant heat in them setting Levi's skin alight with the need to be touched. His shirt is black, and the glint of blond hair at the unbuttoned collar draws Levi's attention like a magnet. His teeth itch with the urge to bite.

"Come here." Erwin touches his knee, and watches with naked appreciation as Levi crawls to his feet. The denim is well-worn beneath his palms as he sets his hands on Erwin's knees, rises onto his feet and settles astride Erwin's thighs once more. There's a box of black nurse's gloves at Erwin's side, and Levi glances at them, then at Erwin, brow raised.

"Medical surplus? Way to make this feel like a prostate exam."

Erwin's hand settles like a brand at the back of his neck. He smiles, lazy, predatory, as though Levi's attitude is all bark and no bite. "Medical fetishes are a thing, you know."

Levi stiffens. Blood roars in his ears. They hadn't worn gloves. They hadn't been sterile. Nothing they'd done had been for medical purposes. Still, they'd used the tools of the trade. Everything except anesthesia.

"Yes," he manages. "I don't have one."

Erwin's smile has faded. He tilts his head to one side, curious, and runs his hand down Levi's back, nails a beautiful threat that leave sensitized skin in their wake, to settle at his ass. "I wish I knew where you went, Levi, when you go away."

Levi forces down the snarl that threatens to break free. He keeps his voice neutral with an effort. "No, you don't."

Erwin's grip tightens on one cheek as he makes a thoughtful sound. His nails dig in, and Levi pushes back into the pain with a pleased grunt. It coils up his spine like a burning serpent, peters out in the heat he can feel rising in his face.

"Still want a spanking?" Erwin asks. His voice is low, heated, and there's few things Levi wouldn't do to hear that voice. If Erwin would never stop talking, would keep describing in filthy detail all the things he wants to do, how he plans to make Levi break, that'd be wonderful.

"Asshole," he says instead, "you promised me one. You'd better not back out."

Erwin grins wide. Shows teeth. He drags his hand back up Levi's spine and grabs his shoulder, shoves him down until he's sprawled across Erwin's thighs and the bed.

Levi pushes his torso up with his arms, starts to draw one knee up under him, testing how dedicated Erwin is to confining him, and Erwin's hand is heavy and hot on the back of his neck, and Erwin's left thigh slides out from beneath his legs, comes over the back of his calves-

He's gone.

An all-encompassing roar of mechanical sound. Black torn by the deep red slash of blood. Splintered. A hideous, clockwork heart grinding down to nothing, a clot of fear. He might be moving. He doesn't know. Someone else is controlling him. The same terrible engine inside him that made him live, that always makes him live.

"-evi."

Light filters in around the edge of his vision, slow. A hoarse voice calling his name. He blinks himself awake, as though rising through water, slipping back into familiar skin that burns with terror. Heart roaring in his ears.

Naked. On his knees, curled over a man's body. Left hand curled about a man's wrist, nails digging into skin in silent warning. Right hand pressed at his throat, thumb digging into the soft place between jaw and skull. He could kill him, just like this. Has done so before.

The man lies still, limp, head tilted back into the soft blue bedspread. His fingers spread, slightly curled. His face has gone pale, his eyes dark, very blue. His voice struggles to make it past the roar of blood and fear in Levi's ears.

"Levi. Come back. Come back to me. It's all right. You're safe. I promise. You're safe."

Erwin.

Levi lurches back off him, lets go, rolls in one motion off the bed and onto the floor, springs back to stand against the wall. Fuck. Fuck. This is why he stays in his apartment. This is why he's broken. This is why he can't be among the rest of humanity, why he should have died there with the rest.

"I'm so sorry," he manages. It isn't enough. The pointlessness of the words sting acid on his tongue. They can never be enough.

Erwin sits up, winces as he rests weight on his arm - god damn it, Levi injured his arm, the only arm he has, the one he relies upon - and shakes his head. "What're you apologizing for? I knew you don't like having your limbs restrained-"

"No. No, fuck that, fuck you, this is my goddamn fault, I hurt you-" he's inching towards the door, remembering his clothes, but he doesn't have a car, but he will walk home if he needs to, because he can't stay here, can't face the fact that he hurt Erwin, that he's fucked up all over again and Erwin will leave him.

"Levi, stop." Erwin stands from the bed, crosses the room towards him, leaves the space towards the door open. God. He might understand. Might be the only one to understand, and Levi has destroyed it. "That was completely and utterly my fault. I reacted like I would with other subs, and that was wrong of me. I knew instantly it was the wrong choice. I'm so sorry."

Levi stops. He would turn away from Erwin's apology, from the pathetic earnestness and sincerity in his voice, but he doesn't feel capable of not keeping all his focus on Erwin. He hates the engine in him that makes him read Erwin as a potential threat. "I hurt you. I lost control."

"Will you sit? Please." Erwin gestures at one of the two worn armchairs in the corner nearest the door, and Levi does. Erwin takes the other one, sits forward, his wrist already bruising where it hangs between his knees. "I fucked up, okay? This is on me, and I'm the sort of dom capable of admitting that. I'm supposed to make you feel safe, and-" he cuts off, looks down, as though gathering his strength, then gazes at Levi again. "I'm supposed to make a safe space for the both of us, and instead I made you have a flashback."

Levi swallows. Grips his own hands tight to anchor himself here. "I should have told you I react violently. You should have known that I'm a danger to you."

"You weren't obligated to do so. You told me enough when you told me your limits. I don't need to know why they're your limits. And I'm obligated - by my own morals, if nothing else - to respect your needs. I damaged your trust in me, and for that, I am sorry." Erwin's voice almost cracks. "If you'd like me to take you home, I will."

Levi stares at the carpet. To be apologized to, to be treated as something other than a ticking bomb: it makes no sense. Doesn't fit with his concept of the world.

"The others. They said I was dangerous. That they couldn't handle my issues. I'm-"

"Oh, for God's sake," Erwin near-snaps, "those other dominants were barely worthy of the name. So you have PTSD, fine, it doesn't make you some threat or fragile creature who has to be protected. You can still participate in the lifestyle and in this sort of relationship, all you need is someone willing to respect your boundaries."

Levi lifts his head, stares at Erwin, half-incredulous. "You don't think I'm some sort of fucking landmine?"

"No. Absolutely not."

Levi takes a deep breath. His adrenaline levels are falling, and he feels a bit steadier now, brave enough to say, "I'd like to stay. I want to try again. Maybe not over your knees, but apparently you're the master of kinky sex, I'm sure there's some other way to hit me."

Erwin blinks, frowns, shakes his head. "You- you want to stay? You're sure? You're not doing this out of obligation, or because you feel you need to prove something-"

Levi snorts. "Please, asshole. Do I come off as the sort to ever do anything out of obligation?"

Erwin's grin is faint, but there. "Okay. We can try again. Come here first, though." He opens his arm, and Levi climbs into his lap, slings his arms about Erwin's shoulders, tucks his head into Erwin's chin, and relaxes, just a bit.

It's been a long damn time since he's felt this way, but this place, this man, might be safe. He might be safe.

At last, Erwin's chest moves beneath his ear as Erwin rumbles, "All right. Let's try this again."

Chapter End Notes

Title from Vienna Teng's 'Never Look Away.' Comments, kudos, bookmarks, and criticism are adored. Talk to me on Bluesky [here](#) (18+ only) or check out my other social media [here](#) if you'd like.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Comfortable?"

Levi turns his head to the right to glance up at Erwin, who's sitting on the edge of the bed, smiling at him. "Very." He pushes his hips into the bed, his feet, luxuriating in the softness of the duvet, the pillows. "What are these, ten-thousand-thread-count sheets or some shit?" Because he may need to go out and buy some for himself, goddamn.

"Uh." Erwin pauses, studies the sheets as though he's never seen them before. "I have no idea, actually. The interior decorator handled that." He settles his hand on Levi's back above his hipbones. It's warm, even through the thick patches of scar tissue-

Acetylene, a blue flame, the thick stench of roasting meat-

There's a reason his apartment doesn't have a fireplace.

Levi arches his back up into Erwin's hand. "And here I thought you had good taste."

"In food, yes," Erwin says, running his fingers up Levi's spine, gentle over the terrible protrusions of his vertebrae, the mountain range that betrays his sickness, "in decorating, no. I was in the military for fifteen years." His hand rasps over the short hair at the back of Levi's head, slides up into the longer hair, and fists, the dull thud of pain rousing Levi's cock.

He lets Erwin pull his head back. The pain is simple, good, forces him straight into his skin and holds him there. Takes the opportunity to study Erwin's headboard, a masculine thing of deep brown leather.

Erwin lowers his head back to the pillows with the same appalling gentleness he used to untie Levi after their first scene. "Good," he says, the warmth in his voice near palpable, and releases Levi's hair.

Levi turns enough to see him. "I'm going to die of old age before you hit me, aren't I?"

Erwin grins, teeth gleaming in the low light of the bedroom, and stoops over the edge of the bed to lift a thick black rubber paddle and a flogger into Levi's field of view. "You're going to wish you hadn't said that," he says. The certainty in his voice makes Levi's mouth go dry, because yeah, that paddle looks like it packs one fuckton of a punch.

He feigns boredom. Rolls his eyes. "Then fucking hit me-"

Erwin stoops, silences him with a kiss. It's near-chaste, a dry brush of lips, and Levi has to fight not to recoil.

"Some day," Erwin says as he sits back up, "I'm going to make you see that there's no shame in accepting gentleness." His eyes are very sad.

Levi turns away, buries his face in his crossed arms, because fuck that, fuck Erwin, fuck him for thinking he can just look into Levi like that, like all his walls are nothing-

Erwin's hand slams down across his ass. The sound cracks into the stillness of the room.

Levi's frozen, just for a moment, and then the pain comes. Tidal, the crash of waves, it races up his spine, builds into one thick curl of warmth-

He grunts into the darkness between his arms, but the pain is good. It's cleansing, draws his mind with its racing thoughts and broken edges down into one focused point, a needle of bright light-

Erwin hits him again, and again. He doesn't slow. He doesn't stop. He peppers every inch of Levi's ass and thighs with red stinging warmth, and then he decides just for good measure to spank him at the tender crease between his ass and thighs. It's an assault, a good one, one Levi glories in. It's pain that he can take. It's a chance to impress Erwin with his ability to endure.

Levi pants into the darkness, rolls his hips back into the pain, and then it stops.

The bed creaks as Erwin gets up.

Levi lifts his head to watch him go, because he's still not comfortable letting someone move freely around him without knowing exactly where they are and what they're doing.

Erwin shakes his hand out, crosses to the end of the bed, and kneels on the mattress beside Levi's knees. He's not smiling, but neither does he look angry. He's studying Levi's reddened ass like it's a puzzle to be fixed.

"What?" Levi starts, but then gets cut off as Erwin says, calmly, without inflection,

"Open your legs."

Levi balks. "Why?"

Erwin finally looks at him, and Levi's breath whooshes from his lungs. Erwin's eyes near-burn with want, his expression now predatory. His voice is a low rumble.

"Because I want you to show me what you're feeling. And I will make you."

He holds Erwin's gaze. Were he braver, were he the sort of man that could put his feelings into words, he would whisper into the space between them. Tell Erwin that a simple command is not simple, not for him. That the fear worn into his bones, stitched into his skin, howls that he shouldn't listen. That he is placing his trust in Erwin's hands, a fragile and newborn thing, despite his fear, and Erwin has far more power than even he knows.

There's a subtle shift in Erwin's expression, an acknowledgement.

Levi clenches his jaw so hard his teeth grind, and obeys.

Erwin touches his ankle, rough fingers curling about the thin skin, the blue pulse of blood so close to the air. Closes his hand over the red scars where the cuff broke his skin into wet rags, like Levi is normal, like Levi's skin is whole. Like Levi is whole.

Levi bites the inside of his cheek to fight back the terrible itch in his eyes, ducks his head into his arms, and snarls, "Get on with it!"

The mattress dips between his knees as Erwin puts his knee there, and then air washes over the inside of his thigh, and then the pain as Erwin slaps his inner thigh, and then the other one, nails digging in viciously, and god, it's good.

His back arches. He bites back a shout, fights the conflicting urge to spread his legs further and close them, trap Erwin's hand next to his cock.

Erwin picks up the flogger. It's a deep, thudding pain, something to sink into, a warmth. Erwin works him over, leaves him hot and stinging from his balls to his knees, and he grunts and endures and loves every terrible red-washed second of it.

Then a reprieve, a moment, and he turns enough to see Erwin stand and pick up the paddle. It's an inch thick, black rubber that blocks out all light, so heavy that the muscles of Erwin's forearm roll and the veins swell when he hefts it. Erwin looks at Levi like he wants to destroy him, peel back his skin and see what makes him breathe and hurt and live, and-

Levi wants to be broken, wants that pain. Pain is a reminder that he is here, that he lived. Lives, still. Pain is something he can take. Pain is something he can control, for he can tell Erwin no, but he won't, because for every gnawing hard ache he can spit in the Titans' faces and tell them that he is alive.

He buries his face in his arms.

The first blow of the paddle breaks through his defenses. It's a blast, nuclear fission, the utter destruction of his walls. He shouts a ragged half-curse and bucks. The weight of the paddle drives him down into those sinful sheets, and they slip against his cock, and he gasps-

Another blow that drives the remaining air out of his chest.

A pause. He sobs for breath. Feels flayed. Broken apart, all his thoughts and fears and anxieties driven into the dirt by the pale solar flare of pain washing his mind blank. It's light, fierce as the daylight Eren and Mikasa brought him into after so long in the dark, a light that had seared to the bone.

Erwin's just as good as everyone said. He varies the tempo, the placement, the strength, leaves Levi's nerves screaming, his fight or flight response howling, and Levi remains. Because he chooses it. Because he's still alive.

There's one last blow, and Levi makes a terrible sound into the dark silence, a broken open wet shuddering gasp. His nose is clogged with the tears he won't cry, he'll never cry, and his

ass and thighs are one great snarled twist of pain-

Erwin's hand settles on his shoulder, startles him out of the dark, and as he lifts his head, Erwin pulls him over onto his back.

"God," Erwin says, stunned, voice half-slurred, "you're still hard-" he cups Levi's cock, runs his thumb over the crown, and Levi gasps, jolts forward, then back-

"I can't wait to get my fingers in you, come here, lie down-" but he keeps touching Levi like he can't bring himself to stop, stroking him hard and slow and deliciously rough.

Levi scrambles around, Erwin letting go, and crashes into Erwin's broad chest. Steadies himself with his hands on Erwin's shoulders, drops into Erwin's lap to feel the burn of denim on his welts, and lunges.

Their teeth clash. Erwin rocks, catches himself with his arm on the bed, and bites back, inhales Levi's hiss of pain like a gift.

Levi kisses him like it's a war, a declaration, digs his nails into Erwin's shoulders. Because this man gets it, treats him as capable and enduring and strong, and Levi wants that, wants him, and he's not letting go. Not for anything.

Erwin rolls forward, gets his arm about Levi's back, lowers him down onto his back. He plants his fist in the mattress by Levi's shoulder and looms over him. His hair's flopping into his eyes, his eyes are wide, dark. The air stinks with sweat and heat. He's breathing hard, gazing into Levi.

"Grab the pillows. Put them under your hips," he says, hoarse, feral.

Levi obeys. The fabric of the pillowcases burn against his welted and bruised skin. At last his hips are raised high. His cock, red and aching, leaves a wet smear along his belly.

Erwin grabs the box of gloves from where they've fallen off the bed, snaps one black glove onto his hand with his teeth, fishes out lube from the nightstand. He comes back and kneels between Levi's legs, his gaze a brand.

Levi looks back at him, though his face burns with the knowledge of how terribly exposed he is. Pale and skinny, all his lacerations visible. Words clog his throat.

"You're so beautiful," Erwin says, hushed. "All pink and bruised. I can feel the heat coming off you from here." He runs his fingers over Levi's welts, the dull throb of pain making Levi tense, his entrance clench, and Erwin makes a soft little moan deep in the back of his throat, like the sight is enough to break him. "God. I'm going to wreck you," he says, like a promise or a prayer. "This tight pretty little hole, it's just begging to be filled-"

Levi's face is on fire. He refuses to look away, because he has no room for embarrassment. Not anymore. They took that, in those cells, in the dark.

Erwin reaches forward, presses the wide pad of his thumb against Levi, groans deep in his chest when Levi tightens instinctively. He works him patiently, persuades him open until he

can fit the tip of one finger inside, and Levi has to tip his head back and moan, because fuck, Erwin's fingers are huge. Forget about his cock - an insistent thick bulge in his jeans - how the hell's he ever going to fit his fingers inside the narrow cradle of his hips?

"Don't worry." Erwin's fucking reading his mind. "We have all the time in the world. If I wanted to, I could make you take a lot more inside you." He grins, and it's demonic and beautiful. Then he pushes his finger in, inch by inch.

"Fuck," Levi grunts. The pressure's too much. He fists his hands in the sheets, rucks up the beautiful white fabric in his fingers. Sweat drips down his spine. "God-" the word splinters, because Erwin is relentless, waiting long minutes for Levi's body to loosen and then taking that space, filling it with him. As if in the end, he'll replace all of Levi's scars and sores and broken places with himself, hold Levi together until he can do it on his own.

"You're so tight," Erwin says, and he's looking up Levi's body with a lazy smile. The muscles of his forearm flex. "Been a long time?"

"Not as long as you'd probably like, asshole," Levi manages to snarl, and then he goes rigid and digs his feet into the sheets as Erwin curls another finger just inside him. He's stretched, worn thin, the heat and ache melding with the bruises where Erwin paddled him. He can imagine it, his rim white and quivering around Erwin's fingers, and the image sets him alight. "I-" he starts, and then snaps his mouth shut, because no way in fucking hell will he ever tell Erwin he can't endure something.

"Yes?" Erwin starts to pull out, and Levi feels empty now, where Erwin's broken him open, and he groans and pushes down onto both of Erwin's fingers, comes to a shuddering halt, and hangs there, shaking. The ache encompasses his spine. He is ice, melting.

"Oh, Levi," Erwin says. He kneels up. Breathes on Levi's cock.

Levi gasps, back arching. His cock twitches, releases a thin clear strand to quiver between his belly and his slit. And Erwin, fucking Erwin, watches him, pleased, proud of himself, affection in the curl of his mouth.

His cock slides along Erwin's cheekbone, his stubble a torturous rasp. Levi groans, can't not, the sound breaking free utterly of his control, and then Erwin hooks his fingers upward and pushes.

"You're so wet," he says. The place where Levi's cock brushed him shines in the lamplight. "Some day I'll make you touch yourself for me, see just how wet I can get you with only my voice."

"Fuck!" Heat rises inside him, a storm of want, and he breaks position, gets one hand up into Erwin's hair, and pulls. He wants to kiss him, bite him, breathe him in, but Erwin resists, cuts his gaze at Levi's arm.

"I didn't give you permission to touch me, Levi." Stone in his voice, implacable.

Levi snatches his hand back like it's been burned, flings it back over his head. Shame burns. He's never disobeyed an order, never failed a mission – he can't start now.

"If you want something," Erwin says, fingertips circling over his prostate, a deep drag that makes Levi want to howl, "you have to ask." His gaze is dark, promising so much, and Levi could so easily fall, if he let himself.

"I want to kiss you," Levi blurts. "Fuck, please, just come here. I want to come, I want you to suck me, just- I want something, please."

"Specify." Erwin gives the order like it's something he was born to, and Levi thinks that maybe, if Erwin had been his team's handler, he would have happily died for him.

"Kiss me. Please."

"Good," Erwin says, and he bends forward and takes Levi's mouth like he's always belonged to Erwin, beneath him. He kisses slow, thorough, mapping every little detail, ignoring Levi's attempts to hurry him along.

Levi fights down the urge to bite him, the aggression jangling along his nerves. The need to take. Because maybe this isn't about him taking, the way he always has, forced to steal and fight to survive at all. Maybe he's meant to accept being given something.

He runs through his limbs, one at a time, urges them to relax, to fall wide into the bed, open about Erwin's broad shoulders, pale against the black of his shirt. He falls back and down into the bed, lets himself go limp. Submits, though all his fear and hatred and the hideous shades of his squad - broken, bloodied, mangled - tell him that to submit is to die.

"Lovely," Erwin says against his mouth. "I knew you could do it. You're so good for me."

He says it like he believes it.

Levi has never been good, lacks the very capability. Good men don't go into special operations. Good men don't let their squad die. But he can't bring himself to tell Erwin that he's lying.

Maybe it's okay to accept this lie, if only for a little while.

Erwin kisses his cheekbone, noses at the sweat-damp fall of his hair, and whispers into his ear, "Come for me. Now." He curls his fingers and pushes hard, giving birth to sparks and fire, and Levi's back arches, his fists curl in the sheets, and he moans-

His come laces the front of Erwin's shirt.

He blinks at it, stunned, thoughts slurred and broken.

Erwin's grinning at him, looking smug and beyond pleased with himself. "That was beautiful. You're beautiful. Thank you." Then he pulls his fingers out of Levi, bites the edge of the glove - Levi makes an involuntary disgusted noise that has Erwin grinning around his mouthful of latex - and peels it off his hand and inside-out. The glove is flung to some

indeterminate corner, and then Levi is suddenly awake and focused as Erwin undoes the buttons on his shirt.

"Oh God, yes," he slurs.

Erwin pulls his shirt off, reddening, and God, he is everything Levi's ever wanted. Every furtive half-defined fantasy of men pales before Erwin's muscular chest and shoulders, the thick swirls of blond hair.

Erwin holds himself tensed, hunched, the damaged shoulder pushed back, as though to hide it. Like Levi would care, like it's something to be ashamed of rather than a medal, a sign that he survived. His wounded shoulder is sewn up neat and tight, the red scar lightening to silver, but Levi only spares it one glance and then he's rolling onto his front and crawling to Erwin's lap. He settles his hands on Erwin's shoulders, fingers careful over the scar, but Erwin startles, swallows, looks at him like Levi's given him a gift.

"You don't have to touch it, I understand," Erwin starts, and Levi snorts.

"Shut up and stop martyring yourself, you idiot. Let me get you off. Please."

"You don't have to-" but Erwin's hips jolt upward, and he's trembling, just a little.

"Fuck you, I want to," Levi snaps back, and then he's got his hands on Erwin's jeans. He pulls down the zipper, thrusts his hand through the slit, and hauls Erwin out.

Erwin is beautiful. Thick and hot and hard in his hand, his fingers unable to meet around his girth. Levi sits back on his heels and studies him. This will be a challenge.

"Please tell me you're going to do something," Erwin whispers, half-pleading, and then tips his head back and groans as Levi wraps both hands about his cock and begins to stroke.

He furrows his brow, intent, because this is something he wants to do right. He wants to make Erwin happy, please him, but he doesn't know how, and the shame is making his body tighten, his eyes itch-

"Here," Erwin says, gentle, understanding. His massive hand wraps around Levi's, swallowing them up, and he guides Levi. For once, Levi has only to let himself be taught.

He swallows, looks up at Erwin, finds Erwin looking back. Silence. Levi almost looks away. Can hardly bear to be known so intimately. But Erwin makes a faint, distressed sound, and so he stills.

"I'm not good," he finally whispers.

Erwin leans forward. Their foreheads meet. Their breaths mingle.

"You're good for me," Erwin says, his breath stuttering. The last word slurs, and he breaks away to thump his forehead on Levi's shoulder, expression screwing up as if in pain, and then he comes all over his hand.

Levi waits for the panic. The memories to swarm into his head. The cries. But there's only stillness, and the wet warmth of Erwin's come, and Erwin, breathing hard. He lifts his hands, curls them about Erwin's palm, draws Erwin's hand to his mouth.

No bile in his throat. No twisting of his gut. The shrieking roar of anxiety quieted, if only for a moment. He doesn't have to do this, and it's that knowledge, that he can choose this, that makes him want it.

Erwin's staring at him, a little stunned. Like he's something to be cherished. And when Levi licks his come off his fingers with delicate little laps he groans deep in his chest and shudders.

"God, Levi," he says, and then he kisses him.

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Erwin comes out of the bedroom, having pulled on pajama pants and an old Airborne T-shirt, to find Levi, back in his jeans and sweater, curled up on the couch and absorbed in one of Erwin's old parachute technique manuals. His feet are pale and stark against the leather of the couch.

"You're actually interested in that?" Erwin falls into his armchair and rakes his fingers through his wet hair. "I fall asleep just trying to get through one chapter. Only finished it because it was required."

"We never did airborne entry in spec ops." Levi looks up. "It was always overland. I wanted to see how difficult it actually is."

Erwin stretches, all too aware of Levi's gaze flicking to the trail of blond hair on his belly. Levi's obvious desire for him had been intoxicating, the gentle curl of his hand about Erwin's wounded shoulder better than any kiss. "Why? Airborne's quieter, quicker, allows you to cover a greater range. Seems an oversight."

"It was." Levi shuts the book and puts it on the coffee table, then curls back up on the couch. Like this, he seems closed off, wearied. If Erwin hadn't seen it, he wouldn't believe that the quiet, still man across from him could contain the raw lust he'd experienced earlier. Levi stares at nothing for a second, then shakes himself.

"A large part of hunting out Titans comes from immersing yourself in the community. You have to interview people, find out if anyone's been acting strange or stockpiling things, be ready to move at a moment to trap the Titan. You have to gain people's trust, which is easier if you don't look obviously military. So no uniforms, no parachutes. Coming overland or by boat allows for cover stories."

"And when you found them?" This is interesting stuff; Erwin had only worked analysis, never gone out in the field. He'd read about spec op's procedures, but it's a far cry from hearing it from a former operator.

Levi's smile is thin and cold as a knife. "Kill them or capture them, preferably before they do whatever they plan to. We stopped a man blowing up an office building once." He looks away, swallows. "Gunter shot him from the next building over while he was giving a presentation. They found the remote for the explosives in his desk later, but. At the time, there was- so much blood. All over everyone's faces."

At last, Levi shrugs. "Sometimes we failed to identify them in time, and people died. Other times, we captured them and turned them over. But as far as I know, we never got any useful intel from them." He swallows, and curls further into himself. Looks, for once, fragile. "Somehow, the Titans resist torture. Pain means nothing to them. Threatening their loved ones does nothing." There's something aged in him, something broken. "It's a fucking great skill to have."

Erwin's seeing only the barest edges of whatever catastrophe lives inside Levi, but it still leaves him breathless.

Levi brings himself back from wherever he's gone. The light comes back to his eyes. "So that's why I'm not good. Good people don't do what I and my team did."

"You did it for the greater good," Erwin says, and Levi half-laughs, looks down at his wrists, where scars curl about his skin like serpents.

"Greater good. Yeah. I wish it'd been fucking worth it." A beat. "Anyway. Sorry. I don't mean to bitch."

"It's all right." Erwin rolls his shoulder, wincing as the phantom pain intensifies. His phantom limb feels clenched, like his fingers are curled into a fist so tightly the nails have broken skin.

"Shoulder hurt?" Levi frowns, sits up straight. He looks like he's going to hunt down all of Erwin's battered nerves and burn them out with nothing but his will, and it's sweet, in a way.

"Yeah. It tends to flare up at night, for some reason. I've got an appointment in two days for mirror therapy, so I'll feel better afterwards." Erwin shrugs. "Besides, it's been worse."

"That doesn't make me feel better," Levi says, expression pinched. "Go take some pills, but you should probably take me home first. I'm not going to die in a car accident because you fall asleep from Oxycontin or something."

"You could stay the night, if you want." Erwin does a bad job keeping the hope out of his voice.

Levi snorts. "Trust me, you don't want me to stay the night. I'm an insomniac. I wake up and move around when I can't sleep, and when I'm asleep I have nightmares. Violent ones." He scratches at the scars on his wrists. "And I don't have my medications with me, so. Plus you probably don't keep a gun in the house."

Erwin raises a brow. "No." He can practically see Levi's anxiety surrounding him like a stagnant cloud, in the way Levi can't meet his eyes, in the nervous drumming of his fingers.

"I have to have the lights on when I sleep, too. It'd make it difficult for you, and I don't-" Levi's jaw clenches, and he scrubs his hands over his thighs in a sudden vicious movement. The self-loathing in the motion breaks Erwin's heart.

"It's okay. You don't have to explain it. Just let me get some shoes on and my keys, and I'll take you home."

Levi takes a deep breath. His voice is raw, his eyes red-rimmed. "Thanks. I'm sorry. I want to. I do."

"It's all right. I promise." Erwin's chest aches with sympathy and understanding and a strange sort of protectiveness. He wants to stand between Levi and his demons, he wants to promise Levi that there's no reason for fear. He wants to do those, and so much more, but he can't fight things that live in Levi's mind, and that is not his place.

The drive back through dark streets is quiet, though the car is electric with Levi's tension. He seems an utterly different man from the one he'd been in Erwin's bed, submissive, calm. If this is what life is like for him normally - wound tight, vibrating with anxiety - Erwin can't imagine how he ever leaves the house.

Erwin brings the car to a halt outside the door to Levi's building. He turns to say something, and then Levi lunges across the space between them and kisses him like it's the last thing he'll ever do.

"Thank you," he says as he pulls back. His eyes are dark, and so serious. "You. You made me feel whole." There's a flush to his cheeks, and Erwin reaches out to cup his thin face, smiling.

"My pleasure. Sleep well."

Levi flashes him a quick smile, kisses his palm, and gets out of the car.

Erwin watches him go inside, and his hand tingles with the phantom imprint of Levi's lips.

He is utterly besotted. He is in trouble.

Chapter End Notes

Title from Vienna Teng's 'Never Look Away.' Comments, kudos, bookmarks, and criticism are adored. Talk to me on Bluesky [here](#) (18+ only) or check out my other social media [here](#) if you'd like.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Content warnings for discussion of torture, PTSD, and mental illness.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Do you think they'd blame you?"

Levi looks away from his psychiatrist - Dr. Niles Dawk - towards the window. It's better not to look at him, not to see the bland sympathy on his face when he talks. God, he hates sympathy. The reflection of the red light on the audio recorder blinks in the window, bright against the bare black branches outside.

"Sometimes, they did." Good. He's started. It will get easier from there. Sometimes he's sat on this couch the whole hour and said nothing, the images and words locked behind his teeth. "While we were in the cell, they'd tell me not to give in. Not to give the Titans any intel." Erd's low voice, insistent, begging him to promise, over and over again, on the verge of tears.

"So I would promise." He closes his eyes. He is suddenly seized with the urge to tremble. "Then we would feel them outside. The vibrations of their footsteps. Someone would begin to cry. My squad was brave. So fucking brave." He opens his eyes, glares at Niles. It seems important that he believe. At last, Niles nods, and he looks away once more. "They were brave. Braver than I was. But when you know what's behind the door, you can't help but cry. It was involuntary. The fear was that great." He shifts on the couch. The leather crinkles.

"They'd open the door." A sudden arrow of light, and them cringing from it, grasping at their cuffs like their chains would save them. "Sometimes there'd be two. Sometimes more. If there were two it meant that they were only going to take one of them, and that was worse."

He bows his head. This is the hard part. His back aches where he remembers them. The pain of the tattoo needle had been scant penance. If he could have one impossible thing, one dream, it would be to trade himself for them. He'd tried. "They'd come in and choose someone. It seemed random. They didn't fixate on anyone, though one week they only took Gunter, and we never knew why. The Titans would grab whoever they picked, unlock their chains, pull them to the door." He digs his fingers into his thighs, but this pain doesn't center him, doesn't pull him back, only makes his throat ache.

"As they were taking them, whoever they took - Gunter, Petra, Auruo, Erd, didn't matter - would start to scream." He can hear it now, the liquid ragged sound of a person pushed beyond all hope. It'd drowned out even the hum of the cell. "They'd beg me to tell the Titans. They'd ask me why I didn't care. They'd call me every horrible thing in the book. They'd ask me how I could watch them suffer."

"But you promised them not to tell," Niles says. "You were doing what they wanted."

"They didn't want to die." If only he could cry. If only he could feel something other than blank, numb horror. He did all his crying in that filthy cell, left that part of him behind. To cry solves nothing. "I did what they wanted, and they died for it, because I wasn't smart enough to convince the Titans to take me instead, couldn't figure out how to make them kill me. If- if I had died. If I'd suffered instead. It would have been better."

Niles frowns at him over the edge of his tablet, raises his brow in an expression Levi wants to punch off his face. But no, he doesn't commit violence anymore. That's the engine talking, not him. But still, like Niles understands. Like he has the faintest fucking inkling of the cell, the dark. "You suffered, Levi."

He springs to his feet, goes to the window, his heart pounding with the need to hurt, to not be here anymore. He has to force himself to unclench his jaw, easing the pain in his head.

"Yeah. Okay, I fucking suffered. I've got scars enough to tell that. But I have all my fingers and toes. I kept my limbs. My eyes." There's a cardinal in the branches outside; he watches it and doesn't see. "My skin. My life."

"And if you'd died, would that have saved them?" Niles' reflection glints in the window.

Levi has to take a deep breath, because he wants to snap, and it's a real question, though facile and stupid. "No. Of course not. The Titans would have killed them anyway, because they didn't know the intel, and the Titans couldn't use them against me."

Though they'd tried. God, how they'd tried. The painting leaning against the couch – his last view of Auruo's body as they pulled it from the cell, the light terrible against his scars, the pulverized black wrecks of his feet – is testament enough to that.

He perches on the edge of the couch again, ready to move. Too difficult to settle, lean back, trust that this space is safe.

Niles scribbles something on his tablet, then looks up. "How're you doing physically? Sleep, appetite?"

"Both still shit. My weight's holding steady, though. The doctor was pleased."

"Are you taking your sleeping pills?"

Levi grimaces. "No. Not unless I absolutely have to. They make me sleep too deeply, and I want to be able to wake up if I need to."

Sleep. A riot of horrible images, the most vulnerable he can still be, open to anyone clever enough to break in.

There are five birds in the tree outside. Three leaves on the nearest branch. He jerks himself out of the counting, biting down the urge to curse himself.

"All right." Thank fuck Niles just accepts it; he can be pushy and ask idiotic questions, but all in all he's a good therapist, and Levi's lucky to have him. "How's the abnormal thought processes? The obsessions? Any flashbacks?"

Levi picks at a hole in his jeans. All of a sudden he's so fucking tired, because what a laugh, that he's made progress, that he's better than the man he was when he came home - that the way he is now is 'better.' Like he'll ever really be better. Like he'll ever be normal. He answers anyway.

"The obsessions are still the same. I still count, but I've gotten better at noticing when I'm doing it, and sometimes I can make myself stop, so good job, cognitive behavior therapy, I guess. I can't make myself stop checking the locks, though. Or needing to have a gun near me if I'm sleeping." Shame burns in his gut at the memory of Erwin's bemused expression when Levi asked if he had a gun. Of course he didn't. Because functioning people don't need guns to sleep. "I'm doing a little better on the needing to be clean constantly. Still have to have the lights on all the time."

Niles listens without expression. "So you still need to feel the need to control your environment."

"Yeah." Levi glances at Niles, then stares somewhere into the middle distance, because he doesn't want to see Niles pity him. "People don't get the essential thing about torture." There. He's said it. The tiny fucking word that surrounds him every second of every day. "It's not about pain. Pain's a side effect, a useful one, but it's not the meaning- the thing that haunts you."

Silence. A blessing. A reminder that he is out of the dark and the noise.

"It's the loss of control. Everything you thought you had, everything you are, they can take." The gnawing horror of waiting for them to come squirms slow and razored in his spine, because somewhere deep in him the certainty that they will come lives on. "They decide everything. When you sleep. When you eat. When you're in pain, and when it stops. When you breathe. When you vomit." His squad had once been ashamed of that, when the Titans brought them back reeking of vomit after the pain had been too much, and then even that shame had gone, because it had become normal. "Nothing you thought was yours is yours to keep. Not even who you were before."

He looks down at the picture. "Then you're rescued, and they want to give you choices, and they want to make you get better, and the world is. Too much, sometimes. And you'll never be better."

"'Better' is a loaded term," Niles says, peering at Levi over his glasses. "And you're right. A lot of people think that surviving torture is the hard part, and once you're in therapy all we have to do is prescribe you some pills and spend an hour discussing the psychological implications of your experiences and then you'll be just fine. Which is obviously wrong."

Levi doesn't dignify that with a response.

"We've still got a lot of work to do, and most of it's going to be done by you outside this room. As for 'better,' well - I can promise you better. We can get you to a better place than you're at now. I'm not going to promise you 'normal,' because I'm not in the habit of making promises to patients I don't intend to keep."

Levi's lucky to have him. He tucks his hands between his knees to stop the urge to drum his fingers and meets Niles' eyes.

"I had a flashback, by the way."

Niles straightens. Worry glints in his eyes, because flashbacks are the most dangerous things Levi has to deal with. The obsessions only harm himself; flashbacks can hurt others. "Okay. What's the context? Any injuries?"

Levi takes a deep breath to steady himself, because he can still remember the badly-hidden fear in Erwin's face, the tremble in his voice as he was confronted with the fact that Levi is still - may always be - a ticking bomb.

"I'd gone home with a guy. Erwin." No change in Niles' expression, only concern. Good. Last thing Levi wants to deal with is homophobia on top of all the other shit. "He put his leg over the backs of mine, and I guess I felt confined. And then I was. Gone." In the dark and the noise, where everything slipped through his fingers.

"How long were you out?"

"I think about thirty seconds." The longest Levi's ever been caught in a flashback is five minutes, but it's been getting shorter. "I came back to myself and I had Erwin pinned. I had my hand up against his jaw." Levi wants to grind his teeth - his head already aches in anticipation - but holds himself back, though he can't get the image of Erwin's face out of his mind. "I could've killed him easily. I've done it before when in spec ops, people don't know how little pressure it takes to unseat the skull from the cervical vertebrae."

"But you didn't." Niles is a bit pale. "Still, though, that's close. How'd this Erwin react?"

Levi curls his fingers together, tenses and relaxes his feet inside his ratty sneakers to try to release his anxiety. "As well as could be expected. He said he was sorry for triggering me, and I apologized, and we went on from there. He wasn't afraid of me." That's still a fucking miracle.

"Impressive. How long have you two known each other?"

"Few weeks."

Niles frowns and scribbles something. "You're both serious about this?"

'Serious' is maybe not the right word. Sure, Levi likes Erwin - quite a bit, really - and they're pretty compatible personality-wise and in bed, but that's not something to build a life-long relationship on. "There's the potential for something serious," he hedges.

Niles raises a brow at him but doesn't push. "Word of advice. You're very socially isolated right now - don't give me that look, you know you are - and I don't want you to end up feeling dependent on the first relationship you try after coming home."

Which is -

Pretty astute, actually, and Niles is saying it out of worry. Besides, he doesn't know that Levi's scened with a few other men. Doesn't know he's involved in the scene at all, really; Niles is nice enough, but he's a bit stodgy, and the last thing Levi wants is to make the old guy's heart explode.

"I'll take it under advisement," he says instead.

Niles nods, and they finish the session with the usual boring back-and-forth about whether they need to adjust Levi's medication dosages.

At last, Levi tucks his painting under his arm, shakes Niles' hand, and heads out to the subway stop near the veteran's hospital. It'd be easier if he drove, but for now Niles and some of his other doctors don't want him in control of a half-ton of metal, since flashbacks don't go well with vehicles. Halfway there, his phone buzzes: a text from Eren.

There's a deal at Stromboli's for dollar pizza tonight. Mikasa and I are going to hit it up since Armin's got to stay late at work and he doesn't like us in the kitchen without him. You in?

Armin acts like a stereotypical 50s housewife about his kitchen, although with the amount of times the fire alarm's gone off because of something Eren and Mikasa did, it might be warranted. Anything more complicated than a microwave is beyond them.

Levi takes the stairs down to the turnstiles, typing one-handed. *Sure. Okay if I ask Erwin if he'd like to come with?*

Oooh. Meeting the friends already? Serious. :p

I know where you live. He's not smiling, damn it.

Mikasa says she's fine with it, and so am I. We're going there at seven.

All right.

Levi texts Erwin next, and as he's heading up from his station towards street-level, his phone buzzes.

Erwin's in.

Hopefully Mikasa and Eren don't drive him away screaming.

-

Erwin finds Levi outside the restaurant. He's waiting with two people Erwin doesn't know - must be the Eren and Mikasa Levi mentioned - and half-smiles as he sees Erwin.

"Hey." He elbows Eren and Mikasa, nods at Erwin. "These are my neighbors, Mikasa and Eren."

"Actually, we're his best friends," says Eren, who shakes Erwin's hand with a wild smile before passing him off to Mikasa, who has a surprisingly strong grip. They only look at his right shoulder a few times, so he counts it as a win. "He doesn't like to say it because God forbid he actually have friends, but it's true."

"As much as Levi doesn't want it to be," Mikasa adds, then leads them into the restaurant, a charmingly dilapidated place with old black and white photographs pasted on the walls in lieu of wallpaper.

As they wind through the tables, Levi slips his hand into Erwin's back pocket in silent possessiveness. They all slide into a booth, Mikasa choosing one where Levi can face the entrances and exits without comment. A good friend.

Erwin takes the spot next to Levi, nearest the wall. He has to suppress his grin at the way Levi leans into his side without being obvious about it, like a cat requesting petting but too proud to give in completely.

"So how'd you three meet?" Erwin asks, figuring it to be a good conversation starter.

"Oh. Uh. We're neighbors," Eren starts, but Levi sighs.

"Mikasa was in the military. Spec ops, too, though not the same squad or handler. Thank God, if I'd had Simmons as our handler I would've killed the man."

Mikasa's mouth twitches. "He had his good points. Not many."

Levi rolls his eyes. "She met Eren on an operation, and then I met them later on the same op. When I got discharged, Mikasa was as well, and they followed me." He glares. "Because they can't take a hint."

"Please," Eren scoffs, and even Mikasa grins, a smile just visible over her red scarf. "You love us."

They have a good conversation about the military while waiting for their meals to come, though Eren says little, only smiles his strange, half-maniac smile. Still, Mikasa and Eren seem to be good for Levi; they draw him out of his shell, until he relaxes into Erwin's side, and Erwin can curl his arm about Levi's shoulders, corded muscle over bone.

Mikasa notices, and favors Erwin with a small, secretive grin.

"Pizza's coming," Levi says, noticing before anyone else, and nudges his elbow into Erwin's ribs. "Got to go wash my hands, be right back. Entertain the numbskulls."

"I'll do my best." Erwin moves aside to let Levi out, then turns to face Mikasa and Eren with no small amount of worry. For all that Levi's spent the whole time bemoaning their presence in his life, he obviously cares. There's a bone-deep loyalty in the way he looks at them, like he will pay any price to defend them.

"What?" Eren grins. "Afraid we're going to threaten you or something?"

"We're all adults," Mikasa says, "and Levi can handle his own affairs. He doesn't need our protection." She frowns, then shakes her head. "Actually. Give Eren your phone."

Erwin pulls it from his pocket, but doesn't hand it over just yet. "Why?"

Eren and Mikasa have one of those quick silent conversations people who know each other well just seem capable of, then Eren turns to Erwin. "There are Titans in the area, and since Levi's former spec ops, and you're... whatever the hell you are to each other, it's possible that they might come after you. Not very likely, but it's possible. If you're okay with it, we were going to program your phone so if anything happens, you can hit a short code and it'll text me, Mikasa, and Levi your GPS coordinates when you sent it. We'll know you're in trouble, and where you were."

"Again," Mikasa adds, serious, "is it likely or probable? Absolutely not. Is it possible? Yes."

Erwin considers. He knows little about either of them. But Levi mentioned the Titans, and Levi trusts them, so he can try to trust them, too. "All right."

Eren takes his phone, expression grateful, then starts tapping away at it. "The hell is this, you've got so much bloatware on your phone. God, and spyware, too!" He looks honestly annoyed by the presence of non-Eren-approved apps. "Okay, seriously, Erwin, where the hell did you buy this?"

"Eren works part-time for a phone store," Mikasa explains, "when he's not in school."

"What're you in school for?"

"Paralegal," Eren says without looking up. His thumbs fly over Erwin's phone. "I don't want to be a lawyer, but I do want to be involved in the justice system and help people. Okay, done. It's a pretty simple if-then program; all you have to do is hit the emergency button or say 'Titans, help' and the phone will do its thing." He hands it back, grinning.

"Thanks," Erwin says, kind of touched despite himself. The conversation cuts out as the waiter slides their plates onto the table, and then Levi arrives, his hands an awful raw red, the water he used so hot that Erwin can feel the heat radiating off Levi's skin.

Erwin says nothing as Levi slides in next to him, glancing suspiciously at Eren and Mikasa. Drawing attention to it won't do anything.

"We were perfect angels," Mikasa says before Levi can give voice to his suspicions.

"Bullshit," Levi says, but seems content to eat pizza rather than continue the conversation. He manages two slices before he's too full to eat more, while Mikasa and Eren tear into their slices like buzzsaws.

At last, the evening ends quietly, with Eren and Mikasa slipping away into the darkness towards the subway stop, waiting at the corner for Levi to join them.

"Hope they didn't freak you out," Levi says, glancing at their shadows.

"They were fine. Eren smiled a bit too much and looked like he'd stab me as soon as talk to me, but I had a good time." He's surprised by how much he means it. Still, Eren and Mikasa had been good company, and Dr. Arlert will be pleased to hear that Erwin actually got out.

Levi winces. "Yeah. Eren's got a history I can't talk about. He's a good kid, though, despite the fact he drives me into screaming rages half the time."

"Don't doubt it. Thanks for inviting me."

"Thanks for coming." Levi grabs Erwin's hand, entangles their fingers, studies their joined hands. "Would you-" he stumbles, and the slight flush on his sharp cheekbones is so uncharacteristically sweet Erwin wants to draw him close and never let him go, "Would you like to have a scene this Saturday?"

As if Erwin would ever say no. "Of course," he says, and pulls his hand from Levi's, curls it about the back of Levi's neck. He doesn't tighten his grip, all too aware of what Levi can do when he feels trapped, but the meaning of the gesture is clear. "What did you have in mind?"

Levi tilts his head back to feel Erwin's grip, the short hair at his nape tickling Erwin's skin. He licks his lips, an unconscious gesture that leaves Erwin instantly wanting to kiss him breathless. "I liked the ropes. I liked your fingers." He glances down at the zipper of Erwin's jeans, then cuts his gaze back up, a slight smile tugging at his mouth. Leans up and whispers in a hot wash of air against Erwin's jaw, "I'd like to learn to blow you."

It takes all Erwin has not to choke. Instead he slides his hand to cup Levi's jaw, runs his thumb across Levi's lower lip. "We can do all of that," he says, hoarse, the sleeping predatory part of him stirring to life. "I'd love to teach you."

Levi's smile fades. His eyes are two seas of black, lit only by the restaurant's faded neon signs. He turns his face into Erwin's hand, kisses his palm once more - so trusting Erwin's chest aches - then draws back, stubble rasping against Erwin's fingers. "Saturday. Your place? What time?"

Erwin can see the soldier in him, in the way he searches for orders without ever asking explicitly.

"I'll pick you up at seven."

"All right." Levi's relaxed into the intangible bondage of direction, stands loose, so unlike the compact rigid man he so often is. Regret flickers in his expression. "I'd better go before Eren and Mikasa get impatient." He strikes in a blur of motion, gets his hand about the back of Erwin's neck and yanks him down into a kiss.

Erwin settles his hand on the sharp cut of Levi's hip, keeps it there until Levi pulls away. "You're going to give me a crick in my neck," he says, smiling to gentle the words. "You can ask for a kiss, you know."

Levi looks away. "I know." Then he grins, a little feral. "But where's the fun in that?" He turns towards Eren and Mikasa. "See you Saturday," he says, and then strides off into the night.

The shadows swallow him up.

Chapter End Notes

Title from Vienna Teng's 'Never Look Away.' Comments, kudos, bookmarks, and criticism are adored. Talk to me on Bluesky [here](#) (18+ only) or check out my other social media [here](#) if you'd like.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Levi's been jittery all week. Niles upped one of his anti-anxiety pills, and it makes him sleepy, and he hates it, and he was startled awake one morning by the roar of a jackhammer in the street outside where they've started doing road repairs, and that put his whole day off-kilter, and-

By the time he slides into Erwin's car, he's so on-edge and wound tight his bones ache with it. His heart thunders in his ears.

"You all right?" Erwin asks as he puts the car in gear and inches past the barriers the road crew left behind.

"Hard week." Levi glares at the potholes and seethes. "The noise, it's jarring. It woke me up, and I don't sleep much as it is."

Erwin glances at him. There's sympathy, but no pity, in his expression. "You're tense."

"Yeah."

Erwin studies him for a second, then seems to make a decision. His eyes gleam in the faint light from the dashboard. "Lean your seat back as far as it can go. You don't have to close your eyes if you don't want to, but try and calm yourself down if you can."

"What do you think I've been doing, sitting around with my thumb up my ass? I've been trying to calm myself down, and it's not working!" He instantly regrets the remark as Erwin's jaw tightens.

He doesn't look at Levi, only concentrates on his driving. "I'm not trying to make you angry." His voice has gone empty of all feeling, and Levi would get down on his knees and beg if that was what it took to make Erwin not look like that.

"No," he says, digging his fingers into his knees. "I just. I've been trying. All fucking day I've been trying, and I can't make myself stop reacting badly."

"I know you've tried," says Erwin. "I'm not trying to make it sound like you haven't. I'm trying to get us both in a good headspace to have a scene, and if you can't trust that I have both of our best interests at heart, then I've failed us both."

Levi jerks upright in his seat. "No. No, I do trust you. You're." He falters, but throws caution to the wind and says, fierce, "You're the only person I trust this much." His throat aches with misery. "I'm sorry."

Erwin doesn't say anything, and Levi can't think of anything to do but obey. He lowers the seat and lays back, stares at the car's ceiling where the lights swell and diminish as Erwin

drives past, one by one.

"Does silence help?" Erwin asks, and fuck if that doesn't make Levi feel worse, because he's just snapped at the only top who's wanted a second scene with him, and Erwin's still acting like he cares.

He nods, not trusting himself to speak, and Erwin turns the radio off. It's just them and their heartbeats in the car, and Levi forces his hands to stop clenching on the leather and listens to Erwin's steady breathing. The breathing helps. Once in a while the noise in the cell had stopped, and Levi had taken so much comfort from being able to hear his squad's breathing, bubbly and ill as it had been. It'd meant they were alive. Still with him. Still near.

His eyes itch. He feels like shit warmed over, and he wants Erwin to tell him he's forgiven, to call him 'good' again, to think him worthy. He swallows. Screws up what stupid stubbornness he still has - the same stubborn refusal to do anything easy that's left him alive and his squad gone - and reaches out. Glances at Erwin for rejection. He rests the tips of his fingers on Erwin's thigh, the thick muscle there tensing and relaxing beneath Erwin's worn jeans as he brakes and accelerates.

Erwin is silent, and Levi lets his hand settle fully. The contact keeps him here, outside of his own head and self-recriminations. He hopes it's enough to express the plea he can't bring himself to say. Hopes Erwin understands that all Levi wants is for Erwin to not give up on him.

As they wait to make a turn, Erwin drops his hand from the steering wheel and covers Levi's, squeezing just a little bit, and the implied forgiveness is worth more than anything in the world.

Erwin leads him by the hand into his house.

Levi hands him his test results, accepts Erwin's; they're both clean, not that he was expecting any less, but neither of them were comfortable jumping to fluid bonding without proof.

Levi follows him into the living room, then pauses.

Erwin's wearing his airborne boots. Black leather, up over the calf. A bit scuffed, worn with use: proper boots. Not the boots some doms wear that haven't seen a day's work in their existence. These are boots Erwin's kept clean, cared for like he cares for all his things, and it's not that Levi is one of Erwin's possessions - he'd shut down if anyone even suggested that - but fuck, he wants that sometimes, the gift that's being cared for.

He lets go of Erwin's hand and folds to his knees in front of Erwin's armchair, runs his hands over Erwin's boots. The smell of leather is heady. He swallows, pushes down the urge to kiss them. He wants to fall, fast and hard, get thrown out of his anxiety and anger into something calmer.

Erwin takes a seat. He looms above, broad shoulders straining against his T-shirt, and there's something amused and a little fond in the way he gazes at Levi. "Got a boot kink?"

He's been asked by other doms to lick their boots, fuck himself on them, and every time the request leaves him cold. "It's that they're yours. Not that they're boots."

Erwin's gaze warms. He smiles, reaches out to run his hand through Levi's hair, so gentle Levi's teeth ache. "Normally I'd order you to get down and clean them, but negotiation, first."

"I trust you," Levi blurts, because he wants to not think, he wants to undo the zipper straining over Erwin's cock, he wants to do anything but negotiate. "Can't we just start?"

Erwin blinks. His grip tightens in Levi's hair and he pulls his head back, studying Levi's face with an intensity that burns. "You really need me to put you down." There's no judgment in him, only a quiet certainty that he can give Levi what he needs.

"Please," Levi whispers, because his skin's on fire and itching with anxiety. His heart's going too fast or too slow, he can't tell, and he can't stop needing to pace, to check the locks, to claw at his legs until the pain draws him down into his body.

"All right. I'm going to name some things." Erwin leans forward, pulls Levi's head down onto his thigh, and Levi curls one arm about Erwin's calf and holds on. "Say yes or no."

Finally. Certainty. Rules.

"Yes."

Erwin's hand is a brand against his head, his thumb rough beneath his ear. "A rope body harness like we did before."

"Yes."

"Fingering."

"Yes."

"Plugs."

Levi shivers. "Yes."

"Vibrators."

"Yes."

"Orgasm denial."

"Yes."

"Scratching."

"Yes."

Then Erwin's mouth is next to his ear, the gentle threat of teeth about his earlobe, a wave of heat as Erwin whispers, "Sucking my cock."

Levi jerks, cock rubbing against the toe of Erwin's boot, a white flare of arousal, and slurs, "Please."

Erwin yanks his head off his thigh, the pain a sharp shock, and pulls his head back until Levi has to arch his back, chest thrust out, and he burns with how he must look to Erwin. Erwin's gaze is like a knife dragging down his body as Erwin looks over every inch of him, lingering on the straining jut of his cock, and then looks him full in the face.

"I didn't ask for you to beg," Erwin says, level, like Levi's momentary disobedience isn't even a challenge. Like Levi's not even a danger. "I asked you for yes or no."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir." The word comes to his lips naturally, and even as Levi says it he can feel his boxers soaking through.

Erwin's eyes darken. "Oh," he breathes, "Very good." He licks his lips, and for a moment looks surprised at how much a title can affect him. Then he lets go of Levi's hair, and Levi falls backward, catches himself on one arm, sprawls on Erwin's floor in a tangled mass of need.

Erwin's voice is smoke, something that gets inside him and leaves him shaking. "Now," he says, as he nudges the toe of his boot into Levi's balls, the pressure and the pain more a tease than a punishment, "I believe I asked you a question. Do you want to suck my cock?"

"Yes, sir," Levi says through gritted teeth as Erwin drags the hard rubber sole up over Levi's cock, presses it into his stomach, and being able to ask this of someone he trusts is so fucking good.

"All right." Erwin keeps his foot there, the pain a throbbing undertow that laces every breath, every heartbeat. "Safewords."

"Yellow, red," Levi manages around the hope rising in his throat.

"Go take a shower and do what you need to do." He's not smiling, his expression predatory, hard. "Don't you dare come."

-

While Levi takes care of his routine, Erwin gets out some things from the closet in his bedroom. Some hemp ropes, these softer than the scratchy ones at the club, in large widths and thin ones; zipties; safety scissors; gloves; a slender silver vibrator; an inflatable plug. It's been ages since he's gotten to use these things, and he finds himself grinning as he checks the batteries and gets out a condom for the plug.

The shower's been off a while, but Levi hasn't come to find him. Strange. He leaves the bedroom, mouth drying at the silence, and frowns at the closed door of the hall bathroom. The soft, slow dripping of water. He swallows.

"Levi?" he calls, rapping his knuckles on the wood.

"Yes," Levi says, but he sounds... off. Distracted.

Erwin pushes open the door and finds Levi standing by the shower, gaze fixed on the black patch in the shower tiles, there ever since he bought the house.

"Are you-" but he shuts up as Levi cuts him off with an irritated gesture.

"The dirt. I can't get it out."

Erwin takes a cautious step into the bathroom, his good humor flickering out. "I keep meaning to get the tiles replaced. It's always been like that, I've been over it with every cleaning product known to man."

"I'm sorry," Levi says, still in that distracted, far-away tone. "I meant to come find you. But I kept trying to scrub that black patch off, and it wouldn't come off, and I couldn't-" he's wound tighter than ever, practically spitting, "-make myself fucking stop."

"Hey," Erwin says, reaching for Levi's shoulder, and thank God Levi allows Erwin to turn him away from the shower and pull him out of the bathroom. "It's okay. I was just a little worried, that's all." He can't say he understands, because he doesn't. He doesn't understand obsessive compulsions, the gnawing need to check because you can't trust your own senses, and he won't insult Levi by implying he does.

"You and everyone else that knows me," Levi says, but he sounds like himself again, and the gaze he turns on Erwin is clear. He's ill-at-ease, tense under Erwin's grip, his attention flicking to the window, the doors, the rings above Erwin's headboard, settling for a moment on the items laid out on a towel on Erwin's bed. "Not good in my head right now."

"We'll work on that. Stand there."

Levi settles into an attention stance in the middle of the room, watches Erwin as he gathers up a length of wide rope and doubles it in two. "Same type of harness?" He's so stiff Erwin's back hurts just looking at him, and he watches Erwin approach with a strange desperation.

"Yes," Erwin says. "Though with a slight modification."

Levi shivers as Erwin lays the middle of the rope over his neck, digs his toes into Erwin's carpet. So tense he's likely to break as bend.

Erwin grabs hold of both sides of the rope halfway down Levi's chest, but doesn't tug - still unsure whether that's too far, in this moment - and bends down to kiss him. Gentle at first, refusing to be drawn into the need Levi bites into his lips, keeps it gentle until Levi subsides with a frustrated whine. Tightens his grip on the rope and kisses Levi hard, bruising his mouth the same way he'd bruised his cock-

Levi's hands, a hint of pressure at his shoulders-

Erwin pulls back, frowning.

"Have to ask permission to touch you? Sir?" Levi says, all sneering insinuation, and yes, all right. If this is Levi asking for it hard, to be forced out of his own head, then Erwin can do that.

"I will make you regret that," he says, soft, stroking his thumb on the rope. "You'll beg." He's certain of it, knows he can break Levi exactly the way he wants to be broken, and Levi, by the half-wild snarl on his lips, knows it too.

"Make me." Yet Levi obeys when Erwin shows him where to tie the knots, and that obedience, even as Levi fights his own needs, is triumph. This fragile balance between them could be broken, but they both keep it going, stoke the fire. Levi ties his own bonds with shaking hands as Erwin kisses the breath out of him, bites red marks into his shoulders, breathes hot and wet over the deep pit of a scar just to feel Levi shudder.

This harness doesn't wind around Levi's cock or balls; instead, the ropes each loop a few times around his thighs and then meet at the base of his spine, leaving Levi's ass available for whatever Erwin wants. As Erwin draws the harness up Levi's spine and begins the process of tying it closed, Levi's head falls forward.

"If you need to fight it, go ahead. Just know that I'll still be fucking you on my fingers while you do."

He has just enough slack in the ropes over Levi's spine to wedge his forearm through it and pour a trickle of lubricant down.

Levi shudders. His hands curl into fists, and he jolts as Erwin kisses the back of his neck, where a scar flowers silver. "Get on with it."

"Begging already?" Erwin brushes a finger over Levi's entrance, suppressing a groan as Levi's body grabs at the tip of his finger, and settles in to slowly open him.

"Fuck you," Levi says and pushes forward like a recalcitrant animal, ropes tightening against Erwin's forearm, but Erwin pulls him back - not without effort, Levi's got a lot of power in his small frame - and shakes his head.

"Bad choice. I was going to give you three, but now you'll get two fingers, and that's it."

It's hard going with Levi this tense, shifting this way and that as if to test Erwin's resolve, but he manages to get one finger into that yielding heat, curls it to pull Levi's entrance wider and slides a second one in without much preparation. Levi's body stretches white to accommodate him, clamps down hard, and Erwin's trapped.

Levi groans, shocked, jerks up onto his toes, hands curling about the ropes at his thighs. "Oh, fuck," he breathes.

Erwin smiles against his shoulder, where he's sucked a deep red bruise. His forearm and wrist are starting to ache, but he spreads his fingers as wide as he can get them within the narrow confines of Levi's body. He can see Levi's face now, his eyes alternately blind and wide or squeezed shut, the red flush spreading over his face and neck, how his mouth falls open to moan or tightens so he can bite his lip, and he wants to ruin him.

"Like that? Just imagine me using my mouth to do this - sucking at your pretty hole, opening you up with my tongue, eating you out-"

Levi's cock jerks as he groans, body fluttering about Erwin's fingers and tightening greedily. His eyes fly open, and he twists enough to stare at Erwin with an expression somewhere between ravenous desire and absolute disgust. "Fuck, what? Your mouth? On my ass? That's so unhygienic-"

"That's why we have dental dams," says Erwin, managing not to smile, and curls his fingers into Levi's prostate and holds them there, deep unrelenting pressure, just to be cruel.

Levi locks up on a shout, his hands white-knuckled about the ropes, and it's an open question whether he even hears Erwin growling into his ear,

"Don't you dare fucking come-"

Levi sags back into Erwin with a sound that's like nothing so much as a sob. "Oh my god," he manages, chest heaving, "you're a prick, sir." A fine tremor wracks him, but he's calmer, more himself, and Erwin's satisfied for the moment.

He pulls his fingers out, slips his arm out of the harness, and tightens it enough to be felt. "Stand in front of the bed facing me."

Levi glances at him, expression simmering with rebellion, but moves to obey, too slowly for Erwin's taste. His red cock sways with every step, the tip already slick and gleaming.

Erwin scoops up the silver vibrator, pockets the remote control, and picks up a short length of narrow rope. "Too slow, Levi. That's one more."

Levi watches him do it, brow furrowed, attention flicking between the objects as he tries to figure out Erwin's plan. "One more what, sir?"

Erwin rests the vibrator on top of Levi's cock. "Hold that there. As for your question, that's one more time I'm going to push you to the edge and not let you come."

Levi opens his mouth to snarl something.

"Think carefully whether you want to say that," Erwin says calmly, beginning to wind the rope about Levi's cock to hold the vibrator there. He is not so kind as to not give Levi a few strokes of his thumb against the sensitive head on the way.

Levi closes his mouth, but favors Erwin with a poisonous glare, even as his expression twitches with each slow roll of Erwin's thumb across his cock.

"Tie that shut," Erwin says, and turns away to pick up the plug without watching to see whether Levi obeys. He takes his time about it, wanting to give Levi enough time to decide whether Erwin's show of trust in him is worth obeying.

He turns back to find the rope tied tight and Levi staring off into a corner, face red, jaw clenched, like he's going to ignore the fact that he obeyed. Chooses not to comment, though inwardly he's pleased that Levi's learning to trust him and listen without pushing. Still, this next bit will be tricky, since Levi doesn't like to have someone standing behind him.

“I’m going to put this plug in you,” he says, holding the thin black plug and its accompanying tube aloft. “You can come over my knee or put it in yourself.”

Levi frowns at the tube and bulb, gears practically whirring in his head. “Wait. That thing-“

“-is going to do my work for me.” Erwin grins, steps in closer, and Levi’s gaze is caught by the plug, eyes wide. “I’m going to slide this up in you, and when I tell you, you’re going to fill yourself up. I’m going to watch you stretching yourself wide, and you’ll just have to wait until I’m satisfied.”

“Oh,” Levi breathes, and then he pitches forward into Erwin’s chest, face smashed just beneath Erwin’s sternum. He’s shaking, and his voice is muffled by Erwin’s shirt, but the want in it is clear. “Please, sir. Put it in like this.”

Erwin can’t resist. He kisses the top of Levi’s head, curls his arm about Levi’s shoulders. He loves that Levi’s so much smaller than him, that he can cradle his whole head in his hand, bring him to the brink of gasping with only one finger inside him. For all his small frame, though, Levi’s braver than anyone he’s ever known. To trust him like this, despite whatever horrors lurk inside him- it’s mindblowing.

“I didn’t say you could touch me, did I? We’ll have to talk about this, you know. Can’t have my sub breaking my rules. Still. How can I say no to such a good boy?” he whispers against the top of Levi’s ear, and Levi makes an embarrassed-sounding grunt and practically burrows inside Erwin’s shirt. His cock brushes wet and hot against Erwin’s thigh.

Erwin drags the tip of the plug about Levi’s rim, slips it in to watch Levi’s body accept it greedily, pulls it out as Levi gasps, hips rocking back – teases him until he’s breathing hard against Erwin’s skin, swallowing down pleas.

Then, as Levi’s hand darts up to grab at his shirt, he slides it home. Levi opens to accept it easily, relaxed now.

“Oh, fuck,” Levi gasps, hand falling, and his head falls back as his eyes slip closed, cock jerking in its cage of rope and finding no give. “Oh, God,” he breathes as Erwin twists the plug within him, fingers and toes curling.

Erwin lets go of the base of the plug and passes the bulb into Levi’s hand. He steps back for a moment to study Levi – wrapped in ropes, hard, red-faced, swaying – and steps back in, smile edged with danger, to grab Levi by the hip and pull him forward into his own thigh.

“Shit!” Levi’s eyes fly open, and he’s forced up onto his toes, cock pressed painfully into his own belly. “Oh, God, you asshole,” he moans, jerks down into Erwin’s thigh to try to get pressure, is hauled back by Erwin’s grip on his harness.

“You shouldn’t call the man holding your pleasure in his hands such names, Levi,” Erwin says, stern, expressionless, even as he flexes his thigh into the cradle of Levi’s hips, Levi’s balls trapped between him and Levi’s own body.

Levi whines, high and thin between his teeth, trembles, his gaze fogged with pain and endorphins as he meets Erwin's gaze. His voice is a slurred, ragged thing. "Sorry, sir. Sorry, please--"

Erwin hauls Levi back and turns him towards the bed. "Hands and knees, on the bed. Ass in the air, facing me."

As Levi obeys – much faster than he did before – Erwin drags one of the armchairs to the center of the room and takes a seat, facing the bed. He rests one ankle on the opposite knee and steeples his fingers before his mouth, surveying the scene with pleasure.

Levi's done exactly as he asked, waits for his word, his head turned to watch Erwin. As Erwin looks him over, slow and thorough, baring his teeth in a smile, he nearly begins to shake.

"Begin."

Levi squeezes the bulb to inflate the plug and drops his head into his arms on a groan. His entrance flutters, exposes the shiny black rubber within his body.

Erwin drops his hand to his cock and presses. "You're going to keep squeezing, and I'm going to watch you. Keep going until I tell you to stop."

"Yes, sir," Levi whispers into the sheets. His free hand curls into them, clenches the fabric.

"I wish you could see how beautiful you look," Erwin says, loving the shudder it gets him. "Your skin all marked from my mouth, my ropes. Your hand shaking because you're not sure you can bear to inflate it any more. But you will. Because I want it, and that's all you need to know."

Levi's opening further, each squeeze of his hand on the bulb garnering a sigh or a whine, hoarse now. He's so pink inside, slick, his rim trembling and pale. His body shakes. Sweat beads in the valley of his spine. His dark hair is plastered to his neck with sweat, and Erwin wants to bury his face in it, breathe him in, the scent of his need.

"I love watching you." Erwin pulls his cock out, fists it slowly, savoring it.

Levi twists enough to see Erwin's hand on his cock, and his expression is one of agonized longing. But still he obeys, even though he's panting, red-faced, toes curling.

Erwin stares straight into his eyes. "I love seeing your little hole forced wide on my toys, and I love knowing that you're doing it because I ordered you to." He rubs his thumb over the underside of his cockhead, groans, low and loud, only to watch Levi lick his lips. "I love watching the way you turn red and then white, when I mark you, when I hold you open for my fingers, my toys. Someday, for my cock."

"Yesss," Levi slurs, eyes half-shut, hand working faster on the bulb.

"And I love your voice," Erwin murmurs. "I love the way you slur your words, how you go hoarse with need. I love the way you beg. You're going to beg for me now."

He lets go of his cock, fishes out the vibrator's remote from his pocket, and flicks it on.

Levi bucks, half-screams. His eyes fly wide, and he drops the bulb to snatch at the sheets as though they're the only thing anchoring him to earth.

"You're not done," Erwin snaps. "Hand back on the bulb. Keep going, or I'm going to make you orgasm dry." He stands, approaches the bed, and when Levi obeys, rewards him with a kiss to the base of his spine, just above the ropes.

"Someday, I'm going to make you come, over and over, and when you're overstimulated and sobbing, I'll fuck you," he says against Levi's skin, dragging his lips down to kiss one of Levi's cheeks. Bites hard and holds it. "You won't know what to do, how to handle so much pleasure, and I'm going to fuck you until you come dry, fuck you through it until you cry."

"Sir- sir-" Levi's twisting, twitching, words running together, "I'm going to come--"

"No, you're not," Erwin says, and as Levi opens his mouth to cry out, Erwin digs his nails into Levi's ass and scores a series of deep red lines across those pale cheeks.

"Fuck you, sir," Levi bites out, before his voice degenerates into animalistic panting.

Erwin grabs him by the hip, flips him over so Levi sprawls. His cock's an angry purple, his belly sticky with his own precome, and he stares at Erwin like he's not sure whether to bite him or kiss him.

Then, as Erwin works the bulb out from his white-knuckled fingers and gives it a good few pumps, Levi convulses, head pressing back into the bed, neck a long white arch.

Erwin bites his neck, sucks a bruise, holds his mouth there as Levi nearly reaches orgasm once more. He flicks the vibrator off.

Levi falls back into the bed, limp, mouth bitten red, his muscles loose. His eyes flutter beneath his half-closed eyelids, and he sighs, hips twitching upwards, as Erwin works the plug out of the loose pink clench of him and replaces it with three fingers, curling into his prostate.

Erwin's fascinated by him, this sprawled, exhausted creature, who only rolls his head and sighs as Erwin drives his fingers deeper into him. His back arches, ass rolling down onto Erwin's hands, but he only groans and shifts as Erwin pulls his fingers out of him, denying him completion again.

Erwin returns to his chair, watches Levi.

Levi lies still for a long moment, breathing hard, ribs all too visible beneath his skin. At last, he rolls onto his side, fuzzy gaze drifting about the room until he sees Erwin, Erwin slowly masturbating, drawing his thumbnail over his slit.

"Come here."

Levi gets onto wobbly hands and knees, slinks across the bed, down onto the floor, and Erwin has to tighten his grip to stave off orgasm at the vision of Levi crawling across the floor to him.

He's left a trail of precome where he crawled, and even as he gazes at Erwin's boot, his cock twitches, a thick strand of clear precome rolling down to the floor. Levi drops his head to Erwin's boots, licks them. His shoulders heave with his hoarse breaths. Then, trembling, he drags his mouth up the inseam of Erwin's jeans until his lips are red and swollen from the abrasion of the denim, his breathing now nothing but panting. His eyes are black, riveted to Erwin's hand where it toys with his cock.

"You want this?" Erwin whispers, presses his cock down until the head drags across Levi's lips, leaving them slick and shining with precome.

"Yes, sir," Levi whispers.

Erwin lets go of his cock, fists his hand in Levi's hair. "Then take it."

Levi lunges, works his mouth down over Erwin like it's everything he's ever wanted or needed. Licks his way down the shaft, curls his tongue about the head, near-chokes himself until Erwin pulls him back, holds him in a straining arch.

"Slowly."

Levi blinks, shivers, but listens. Learns quickly that the soft spot beneath the frenulum is Erwin's weak point. Drags Erwin's cock against the soft inside of his lip, darts his tongue into the slit in a stinging kiss, and Erwin strokes his hair, his neck, and calls him the best cocksucker he knows, that his mouth was made for this, to take Erwin's cock.

At last, Erwin wrenches Levi back off his cock, pushes his own cock down, and comes all over his boots.

Levi hangs from his hand, eyes lost.

"Clean them," Erwin says, letting go, and Levi dives to the work, flattening himself on the floor, licking Erwin's boots clean. The soft sound of his tongue on the leather is beautiful, and Erwin listens to it, smiling, eyes closed and head tipped back.

Levi finishes, sits back on his haunches.

"Come here," Erwin says, and Levi climbs into his lap with astounding grace. Coils his arms about Erwin's neck, kisses the hollow of his throat as Erwin undoes the rope about his cock, tosses the vibrator aside. Even the slightest brush of Erwin's thumb against his cock is enough to have Levi jolting, crying out.

Erwin has one last challenge. One he's confident Levi can succeed at. "Look into my eyes. The whole time. You close your eyes, you look away, I stop. Understood?"

"Understood, sir," Levi says, hoarse, and he keeps his eyes on Erwin's even as Erwin strokes him to agonized completion, even as his face screws up in terrible bliss, as he comes against

Erwin's chest, silent, still, mouth open.

Wrecked, broken open, he tucks his head into Erwin's neck. He's breathing fast, but his limbs are limp, his eyes shut, face relaxed.

Erwin holds him close, rocks them both back and forth. "You were so good," he whispers, kisses Levi's temple, his shoulder, his hair. "So very good. I'm so proud of you."

Levi shudders. His fingers curl in Erwin's shirt. His eyelashes flutter against the skin of Erwin's neck. His voice shakes when he says, drained, "Thank you, sir."

Erwin closes his eyes, pulls Levi closer. The room is quiet now, with only their heartbeats, their breathing. Them, living, still.

Chapter End Notes

Please go check out these two amazing pieces of fanart I received and give kudos to the artists:

<http://themonstersoflove.tumblr.com/post/78074122468/asscapades-i-fckin-hate-anatomy-there-are-so>

<http://themonstersoflove.tumblr.com/post/79685634126/aivelin-illustration-to-all-your-demons-and>

Title from Vienna Teng's 'Never Look Away.' Comments, kudos, bookmarks, and criticism are adored. Talk to me on Bluesky [here](#) (18+ only) or check out my other social media [here](#) if you'd like.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Okay, so:

Content warnings for discussion of torture, disability, mental illness, all that.

And microwave nachos.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Get this thing the hell off me!"

Erwin would feel bad about snapping at the prosthetic specialists - they're just doing their jobs - but right now he is holding onto calm by the skin of his teeth. At his tension, the prosthetic arm strapped to his shoulder twists, extends, curls back - moves in all the fucking ways he couldn't get it to move earlier - and Erwin glares at it with every ounce of hatred he has ever possessed while the specialists undo the straps and carry it away. God. Fucking thing isn't worth a tenth of a percent of the tens of thousands of dollars it costs.

Dr. Arlert, seated out of the way, pushes his stool closer to Erwin, but says nothing.

Erwin glances at his expectant face. Hates him, just a little bit, for the perfect compassion in his expression, like he understands. His throat is thick with anger and self-loathing.

"I." He pauses. Manages to keep his words steady with an effort, though he wants to stalk from the room. "I despise every second of this."

"Understandable," Arlert says. "It's difficult."

"No." Erwin looks away, gaze settling on the can of Coke he'd been trying to grip with the neuroprosthetic for the past hour. "'Difficult' is the first time I jumped out of a plane. Dealing with Titans was 'difficult.' This is hell." He says nothing for a second, trying to dampen his anger, but it finally rips free.

"It's just a damn can, and all I have to do is reach out and grab it. I don't even have to worry about not crushing it, but I can't even get the fucking arm to move the way I want it, and I can't stop thinking of all the things I want to do when I have two arms again." He looks down, shoves his fingers through his hair. "Not that I'll ever do them at this rate."

"You're not used to not being in control."

Erwin looks up, raises his eyebrows at Arlert. "You think?"

Arlert smiles, a little embarrassed. "Right. Stupid thing to say. Are you going to make another appointment?"

That's the worst part of this. They're not forcing him to come back week after week and humiliate himself fighting a robotic limb. They've made it clear that this all stops when he wants it to. He's the one who makes the appointments, the one who decides when they're done for the day, and some day he'll be the one to decide whether it's worth it to have the socket implanted in his shoulder.

"Yeah." Erwin laughs, rueful. "I hate this more every week. I hate not being able to control such a simple thing. I hate the feeling of looking over and realizing that my phantom limb's been replaced by that thing, and I hate that I'm having to relearn all of these things all over again. I'm smart, I'm quick to learn, and yet making a fist eludes me." He sighs, stares at the Coke can again, seized with a petty urge to knock it over. How is he ever supposed to use the prosthesis to hold things down, open doors, carry things, if he can't even force its fingers to close? "But I still want to have two arms again more than I want to not deal with learning to use it."

"You're one of my most self-aware patients. We all appreciate your persistence, if maybe not your candor," Arlert says, glancing at the door the prosthetic specialists disappeared through. He glances at the clock, then stands. "I'll see you in two days for our appointment?"

"Yeah." Erwin shakes his hand, then heads out to the front desk to make his next week's appointment, though the whole time he's scheduling it he wants to damn the whole thing. But he's stubborn, has always had a thing for lost causes - some part of him is already convinced that this is one - and he can't make himself give up. Not yet.

It's only on his way to the parking garage that he remembers he and Levi were supposed to have a scene tonight. 'Fuck.' He's in no headspace for it; he barely feels in control of his own emotions, he can't be expected to navigate Levi's as well.

He fishes out his phone as he gets into his car, dials Levi's number.

"Erwin."

"Hello," Erwin says, smiling just at the sound of Levi's voice. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to cancel the scene tonight."

A short pause, before Levi says, careful, "Can I ask why?"

"You can always ask why. Today's been a bit of a wringer, and I don't really feel up to it."

"Do you feel up to company?" Levi finally says, still in that careful tone, as though afraid he'll be rejected.

Erwin's pole-axed, sits and stares at nothing for a moment. In his past relationships, it's always been solely a scene thing; his partners never showed much interest in getting to know him outside of the BDSM context, and while he's never pushed for it, it's always left him

wondering if maybe there's something wrong with him. Maybe he was boring, or too intense, or wanted too much-

He realizes he's been silent too long when Levi says, stiff, "If you don't, I understand-"

"No!" Erwin blurts, far too loudly. He clears his throat. "I'd love to have you over. I'm in the car now, I'll pick you up on my way home from the hospital. Should be about a half hour."

"Understood."

-

As Erwin steers the car into his garage, Levi looks at him with such intensity that Erwin's skin itches.

Levi's been quiet the whole ride over, their conversation about innocuous things - the too-cheerful volunteers at the veterans' hospital, their coffee that Erwin refuses to drink and Levi nearly lives on - and Erwin's thankful, he really is, that he's found someone who doesn't push. So many people would have asked him to talk about it, to describe every nuance of his anger, and he has Arlert for that, he doesn't need more.

"I don't know if I feel up to making dinner," Erwin says as he gets out of the car, "but we could order out for something. There's a good Thai place that does deliveries close by."

Levi's expression is a strange mix of annoyance and fondness as he follows Erwin into the kitchen. "Or you could let me do what I was planning to do and make you dinner." He pauses in the doorway to Erwin's kitchen. "You could run a restaurant out of this. Very fancy." There's no judgment in his tone, but the way he looks at it shows his lack of comfort with the opulent surroundings.

"You're a guest," Erwin protests as he slings his satchel onto the kitchen table. "I'm not that rude that I'm going to make you cook for me. But thanks for the compliment." He's very proud of his kitchen, done up in French country style with a deep ceramic farmhouse sink and copper pots and pans hanging over the island.

"Shut up," Levi snaps, but softens the blow by nudging Erwin into a chair and going to the fridge. He opens it. Blinks. Stares into it with the face of a man who's not quite sure what he's looking at, but knows it's weird. It is simultaneously hilarious and adorable, and Erwin wants to kiss him breathless. "What the hell is all this? Do you make everything from scratch?"

"Yes?" Erwin's not sure what the right answer is.

Levi frowns. "Okay. Ignoring all these bizarre vegetables and shit, do you have eggs? Just regular eggs?"

Erwin manages a smile. "Well, they're organic and from a hobby farmer-"

"Oh my God," Levi says from halfway inside the fridge, "you are such a goddamn snob." He emerges with several eggs and glares at Erwin as he puts the eggs on the counter. "Okay. I'm

making us omelets. It's the only thing I actually know how to make that doesn't involve your weird pink salt or whatever."

Erwin would be insulted, but Levi's looking at him like pink Himalayan salt is some invention of the devil, and oh, he has to grin instead. "Omelets are fine. I have some cheese in there; cheddar and gouda sounds nice. Green onions would go well with it."

Levi stares at the fridge like he's going to gut it. "Where's the cheese? I don't see any bags saying cheddar or gouda."

"In the back, in some plastic bags, there should be some parts of the rounds left."

Levi steps back with the cheese and onions and carries them to the counter. "Of course you buy it in slices off the round. Why can't you eat cheese that comes pre-shredded in helpfully labeled bags?"

Erwin closes his eyes in pain, though he's grinning like a fool, because Levi's such a strange, funny man, and he's glad he's here, in his kitchen, bitching about cheese and food snobs. It eases the sour twist in his stomach, the terrible repetition of 'failure,' 'failure,' 'failure.'

"Because that isn't cheese. That's something hideous dressed up as cheese."

Levi searches the cabinets, stretching up onto his toes, and drags out a saucepan and a bowl. He starts cracking open the eggs and whisking in the cheese. "Oh, whatever. Shredded cheese makes the best microwave nachos."

"I'm going to pretend you didn't say that."

Levi drags out one of Erwin's cutting boards - modified with a rim around the board, since he doesn't have a hand to hold vegetables down with - and chops the onions. He doesn't say anything about the modification, and that's, as always, a gift. He tips the onions into the massive omelet cooking in the saucepan, shreds the cheese, and then turns around, folding his arms.

"If you want to talk about it, you can."

Erwin laughs, but he doesn't mean it. Ludicrous, for him to whine about having issues with his prosthetic to someone who, he's becoming convinced, survived torture. How self-absorbed can he be?

"Only if you want to, though," Levi says, turning to flip the omelet. He's unconcerned about the whole thing, and he's honest about it: that he'll take Erwin's silence or Erwin's words and value them the same, and Erwin's gotten so used to everyone wanting him to talk, to share his feelings, and even if they mean it kindly it still seems like an invasion.

"They're fitting me with a prosthetic arm. Or trying to, at any rate."

Levi makes a sound indicating he's listening, but he's busy dividing the omelet onto two plates and bringing them to the table. He slides into a seat across from Erwin with his own, much smaller, portion. "Problems?"

Erwin chews a bite - surprisingly good - and swallows. "It's one of the new ones, a neuroprosthetic. They've rerouted some of the remaining nerves from my arm and hand to my chest. The theory is that I can think about moving my thumb, and the part of my chest that has that nerve will twitch, and the prosthesis will respond."

Levi cocks his head. "Not working?"

"That would be..." Erwin pauses, angry at himself all over again, "-an understatement." He wants it to work, damn it. He wants his arm back. He wants to be able to steer a shopping cart. He wants to read a book without having to constantly fight to keep the pages open. He wants-

So fucking much, and if he can't get the fucking prosthesis to do what he wants, he'll never have those things again.

"Ah." Levi eats his omelet with the meticulous focus of someone who's still not sure they can rely on their next meal. He glances up at Erwin. "I know that feeling. You going to keep going with it?"

Erwin sighs. "Yeah. I know that all the effort will be worth it in the end, but right now it's hard to see that."

"Could always take a break."

"Not really." Erwin smiles, though he feels worn through, his anger at himself subdued now into a dull blaze of humiliation. "We're trying to train my muscles to move in very specific patterns that the prosthesis can pick up, and if I stop practicing, I lose all the progress I've made so far." He stabs at his omelet. "Small though it is."

"I could quote you the line about every journey and a single step, but I'd hate myself for it," Levi says, straight-faced.

"Please don't, unless you want me to counter with 'no one can make you feel inferior-'"

"It's not a very good threat if you just go ahead with it, asshole," Levi mutters, though he's smiling: slight, but there. He's finished with his meal, and takes his plate and Erwin's clean one to the dishwasher.

"Movie?" Erwin asks, already heading to the living room. He pauses, deliberates between the armchair and the couch, but he wouldn't mind holding Levi for a while, and Levi doesn't seem the sort to come out and ask for it.

"Sure." Levi follows, and Erwin hopes he doesn't imagine the pleased flicker in his eyes when he sees that Erwin's taken the end of the couch and left the rest of it to him. "What's on?" He slides onto the couch, tucks his feet up underneath him, and sits beside Erwin, so still, so expectant.

They settle on a terrible military film with bad acting, a nonsensical plot, and even worse special effects. By the time an artificial satellite controlled by a Nazi AI has carved a gigantic

swastika into a mountain range with a laser, both of them are agog. Levi has uncurled from his crouch and settled into Erwin's side, body loose and pliant, warm against the inside of Erwin's arm where he's curled it about Levi's thin shoulders. Levi doesn't take much notice of Erwin's arm, though he leans his head into it when he grows bored with the ill-thought-out romance subplot.

When the strong-jawed hero flies his experimental fighter plane into the satellite in an ostensible heroic sacrifice, Levi barks a laugh and collapses sideways into Erwin's lap, and Erwin grins down at him. Takes the liberty to run his fingers through Levi's hair, because he can, and because he likes Levi like this: warm and content and trusting him, one arm flung over Erwin's legs.

"Even with you subjecting me to that shit, it's still been good," Levi says, his eyes closed. "Best night I've had in a while."

"Me, too," says Erwin, and isn't surprised to find that he means it. His life doesn't seem lonely at first glance- he goes to the club every so often, attends therapy and prosthesis sessions, sees films with Hanji and Mike- but his house is too big for him, rattling about within its walls alone. He was a bit of a fool when he bought it, perhaps too optimistic, looking forward to filling it with the voices of others. "You're very funny, when you allow yourself to be."

Levi stills. Opens his eyes to look at Erwin. Calm, wary, weighing Erwin's worth. He rolls onto his back, tips his head back into the gap between Erwin's thighs, his neck stretched pale and long. He reaches up to rest one hand, smelling faintly of turpentine, on Erwin's cheek, and looks into him, through him.

Erwin holds very still. He stops smiling, stares back at Levi, willing him to trust him, to believe that he can say what he needs to say without judgment or fear. The moment unwinds between them. At last, he reaches up, covers Levi's hand with his own, huge and clumsy and rough-hewn, and Levi relaxes, just a bit.

He gazes at Erwin, heavy-lidded. There is something fragile in him, in the slight frown he gives before he starts to speak, telling of some internal struggle. "I'd tell you what happened to me, if you asked."

Ah. Erwin exhales. Lets his hand follow Levi's, when Levi pulls his hand away from Erwin's cheekbone and rests it on his own chest. When he lays his hand atop Levi's, Levi's heartbeat taps against his fingers: slow and deep as the beating of a drum. No fear in him now, only the steady certainty of a man who has seen fear full in the face and survived. There's no triumph in this, only the bitter recognition that there is a story to every one of those scars, and it will not be easy.

"I can't deny that I'm curious, but I won't ask. The story is yours to tell, not mine to demand."

It's some small recompense for the gift that was Levi's unstinting acceptance of his own reluctance, his difficulty in speaking about the frustration and anger and sheer helplessness he feels when confronted with the damned prosthesis.

Levi works his jaw. Hesitates.

"You don't have to tell me," Erwin says, gentle. "You have the right to your own past and your own secrets."

"I know." Levi glances away at the television, then reaches for the remote and mutes it. "But I'd like to think that the whole shitty tale isn't enough to drive you away, even though I don't know if it will. I'd like to-" he cuts off, brow furrowing, and stiffens, frowning. "And I'm being an asshole, suddenly putting this on you."

Erwin bends to kiss his forehead, seized by fierce devotion to this bright ember of life in his lap, still burning stubbornly. "You're allowed to take comfort in others," Erwin whispers. "You're allowed to want comfort. You're allowed to want love. You're allowed gentleness as well as pain."

Levi shudders. "And if you knew what I'd done, you might not say that."

"We'll never know that unless I know what it is you're so afraid to tell me."

"My squad died because of me. Four people died because I wasn't smart enough to get us away from the Titans."

Erwin says nothing, because what words can ease such a terrible pain? Levi must have heard 'it's not your fault' ten thousand times by now, and to repeat it would be facile. He settles for interlacing his fingers between Levi's, holding on.

"We had been detailed to track down a man known as the 'Doctor'. There'd been some intel from the files of a captured cell that this 'Doctor,' whoever they were, was angling to create a bioreactor and grow smallpox. Almost no one's vaccinated against smallpox anymore, and if it were to escape into the world, a pandemic would follow. We spent months tracking this guy down. Turned out, his real name was Grisha Jaeger, and he was actually a doctor." Levi's laugh is a raspy, tired thing, the saddest sound in the world. "After he was done stitching up patients at the hospital, he'd go to his lab and work on the smallpox he'd bought from the underground. Trying to make it more virulent."

"We tracked any hint of him for months, but he kept slipping through our fingers, and then one day, we had a breakthrough." Levi shifts, looks suddenly, terribly tired. "Grisha had a kid, and the kid grew up immersed in the Titans. Saw awful things. He worked as a courier between different cells when necessary. He didn't know what their aim was, just that they were his father's friends. One day he got curious and opened up the package he was meant to take to his father. It mentioned smallpox, so he figured it out, and betrayed his father's cell to us."

Erwin rubs his thumb across the back of Levi's hand, but says nothing. Words seem pointless. The story will come as it comes, and it's not for him to direct.

"We try to grab Grisha. Came in armed. Just like we always did. The only unknown variable was the Infectious Disease Department, and sure as shit, they screwed up, almost let Grisha escape because they were so fucking excited about getting to the lab."

Levi sighs. "So Petra, Auruo, Erd, and Gunter are downstairs handing the IDD their collective asses, and I'm standing in Grisha's office. We'd grabbed him quickly, and he'd left a document on the table. I glanced at it." Levi swallows. Seems to ready himself for pain, his eyes flat and gray.

"It was a decrypted message from someone called the Ape, and from the way they wrote to Grisha, they seemed like the leader. Not just of his cell. Of all the Titans." He curls the fingers of his free hand into his jeans, knuckles white. "We'd heard rumors of the Ape, but never anything substantial, never enough to confirm their existence. The Titans always acted so decentralized, it seemed impossible that anyone could be leading them or have an overall plan. The message had the Ape's travel patterns written out, enough so we could predict their movements."

God. That's valuable intel, the most valuable intel about the Titans Erwin's ever heard of, and Levi, from the tight, miserable line of his mouth, knows that too.

"There was." Levi looks away. "A commotion outside. I went to the window, drew my gun." He laughs, a wretched, wrenching sound. "Turned out the police dispatched to cordon off the area and evacuate the civilians were Titans. The IDD team was on the ground in a pool of blood, Erd had just shot one of the Titans in the head, Auruo and Gunter had been clubbed and dragged into the back of the special tactics van, and Petra had taken out three but the Titans had the element of surprise."

"The Titans had never infiltrated law enforcement before. Not to our knowledge, anyway, and we'd worked with special tactics squads on almost a hundred ops and never had a problem. Our handler said they'd been vetted, they were okay." Levi's jaw tightens. His grip on Erwin's hand is almost painful, but Erwin bears it, because if Levi takes solace from it, he will bear all things.

"The Titans shot me in the shoulder and hip. Clubbed me over the head and threw me in the back of the van with the rest. My squad, that I failed, because I got fucking complacent, because I thought our handler knew what the hell he was talking about." He seems to return for a moment, his gaze flicking to Erwin's face. "I can stop. It only gets worse from here."

"Whatever you like," Erwin says into the hush, fixed on Levi's face, lit blue and white by the television's flicker, the tired lines beneath his eyes.

Levi sighs, almost rolls his eyes. "We woke up in the dark. I was bleeding, Auruo was concussed. They'd put us in a cell with no light and a vent that blew so loudly we could barely hear each other speak. All five of us were cuffed to beds, and-" he grinds his teeth, a terrible rasp of sound, and stops only when Erwin squeezes his hand. "I'd never been so fucking helpless. They were mine, my squad, the people I'd picked because they were the best, trained to be even better, and I'd fucking failed them and now we were going to suffer."

He is so very still. His eyes look inward, to some terrible dark place he is still returning from, the sort of haunting that weaves itself between your cells and into your thoughts and never lets go. "Outside the cell, there was a hallway. And across the hallway, there was a room. A red door." He's blind, staring at nothing, all terror in his eyes, the hideous fixity of his expression. "Inside the door, there were steel tables. Ropes. Medical kits."

Levi is stiff against him, a rigid small form of badly-healed scars covering such incalculable hurt. He gazes off into the middle distance to the side of the couch, gray eyes empty of feeling. The thrum of his blood against Erwin's hand where it rests on his chest betrays his stillness.

"They used them on me."

'Oh, my boy,' Erwin thinks, choking down his horror. This grief seems beyond bearing.

"The Titans realized quickly that torturing me wouldn't work. I knew the value of my intel. Even when I broke and gave them the truth, it was cloaked in lies. They wasted their time running after bullshit stories." His smile is a twist of an expression. "They also knew that the others didn't know what I knew." Levi swallows once, a dry click. "My squad had no value to the Titans except as bargaining chips to force me to break. So they took them."

It fits the Titans' methodology. They're exceptionally clever at forcing people to betray each other, and if Levi was made to betray himself and his mission by his feeling for his squad, it would explain some of his guilt.

"They tortured them and made you watch," Erwin says, and strokes Levi's hair in some pathetic attempt at comfort.

Levi closes his eyes and relaxes, head heavy on Erwin's thighs. "Yes. They took Petra and all the others." His voice reveals nothing, only the flat recitation of someone who has walked this path in nightmare a thousand times and never found a way out. "They did terrible things to them. Broke their bones. Vivisected them. Took their eyes. Beat the soles of their feet into red paste." He shudders, makes a low, horrible sound. "Every night they'd toss us back into our cell. My squad, the people I'd sworn to protect, broken beyond recognition." There's enough grief in his voice, well-hidden though it is, to choke on.

"My squad begged me, every night, while I had to sit in that cell, watching them die, not to break. Even if it would save their lives. Even if giving out one small piece of intel would buy them a week without pain. Because we needed to save the intel. For the 'greater good.'" His breathing accelerates, eyelids twitching, and Erwin settles his hand on Levi's chest.

The realization isn't sudden, really: more a slow tide of horror and sadness and understanding of how Levi came to this point, of how hard the world has tried to break him and failed. "You didn't break," he whispers. So devoted, this man, even as his own devotion destroyed him, forced him to watch the people he loved die terrible deaths because he could not betray them. Not even to save their lives.

Levi turns his face into Erwin's stomach, breathes in. "No. I did- I did what they asked. I kept quiet, even as they started to go silent. As the Titans dragged their bodies away, and then it was just me in that filthy cell. In the noise and the dark." His fingers twitch, as if itching for soap and water even now. "Surrounded by their blood and vomit for weeks."

They sit in silence together. Erwin cards his fingers through Levi's hair, slow, rhythmic, and gropes in the dark for words, for something that can mean anything in the face of what Levi's suffered.

He swallows.

"You survived. You're not their victim."

Levi takes a deep breath, goes limp. "Yeah. That's. It's something. Something I'm trying to figure out for myself, because I don't want to be their victim anymore, I want to be a survivor. Niles says the most important part of recovery is reconceptualizing myself as a survivor blah blah psychiatric bullshit, but... some day."

Erwin leans his head back on the couch and stares at the ceiling, gilded silver with faint moonlight. "After I fell," he offers, "after I woke up in the ICU, and they told me how much of my arm they had to take, I thought I was hideous. Disfigured. For days, I couldn't even look at the bandages. Didn't want to accept it, I guess."

Levi's hand curls about his forearm, warm and strong, silent comfort.

"Then I started having the dreams. Where I'm falling again, and I look to my right and I see my arm again. Then the metal spar comes up, in slow motion, and I watch as it saws through the bone. My blood spurts, freezes. I know it's a dream, but I can't make myself wake up. I start pulling the chute, and it doesn't fire, and I pull the reserve chute, and it doesn't fire, and I'm falling, and the wind is howling-

He shuts himself up with an effort, looks down at Levi.

Levi's looking back up at him, a small furrow in his brow the only tell of his concern. His grip on Erwin's arm is near bruising. "For what it's worth, nightmares get better. Mine have."

"Yeah. I know they will, eventually. I just hope 'better' gets here soon."

Levi snorts, half-rolls onto his back. He's putting Erwin's leg to sleep, but having him close is wonderful, his sleepy warm heat a treasure. "You and me both."

Erwin pets him for a few moments more, before he glances at the clock, startles. "It's late. Want me to drive you home?"

Levi glances off to the side, coils into himself, that stiff expectation of denial. "I thought I might spend the night here. I brought my things."

Erwin stares. Part of him is thrilled at having someone stay the night, a warmth in the bed beside him, but there's something-

"Um. You said you needed a gun nearby to sleep." Oh. "Please tell me you didn't bring a gun into my house," he whispers, horrified and yet amused at the utter ridiculousness of the situation.

Levi graces him with a flat stare that shows how unimpressed he is with Erwin's intelligence. "What? No, even I'm not enough of an asshole to bring a weapon into somebody's house without asking them."

"Oh, thank god." Erwin deflates. Shakes his head, smiling. "Sorry, but I just had to know, since you mentioned you have trouble sleeping."

"Eh. I figured it was time I try, and I trust you, so," Levi shrugs, as though he hasn't said the closest thing to 'I love you' Erwin's ever heard.

Erwin pulls Levi up, until the smaller man's straddling his thighs, hands on Erwin's shoulders. Backlit from the television, he looks like some ancient angel, grave and expressionless. One of his thumbs rubs over the gnarled end of the scar on Erwin's right shoulder, and the absent touch, like Erwin's disability is just a part of him, makes him grin even harder.

"Do you want me to show you my security system?" he asks in a sultry tone, arching his brows.

"No, fuckface," Levi says, fighting down a smile, and shoves at Erwin's chest, though without force. "Though if you're willing to let me walk the perimeter before we go to bed, that'd be nice."

Erwin shrugs. "Sure, but only if you promise that you won't murder me in my sleep if I have a nightmare of falling and kick you."

"We're a real fucking pair of winners, aren't we?" Levi says, smile sardonic, hair falling into his eyes. Yet there's something in his eyes, some guarded affection, and Erwin chokes out a laugh, gets his arm about Levi's shoulders and holds him tight, muffling his laughter in the side of Levi's neck.

"We really are," he says, kissing the spot where Levi's heart beats, and the hell of it is that it's true.

Chapter End Notes

Title from Vienna Teng's 'Never Look Away.' Comments, kudos, bookmarks, and criticism are adored. Talk to me on Bluesky [here](#) (18+ only) or check out my other social media [here](#) if you'd like.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Erwin finishes brushing his teeth, takes an aspirin for the dull ache growing in his shoulder, and returns to the bedroom.

Levi, cross-legged and leaning on the headboard, looks up from his book. He's in boxer shorts and a T-shirt from basic training which slips off one shoulder, baring his pale neck. His legs, for all that they're scarred, are surprisingly hairy, and Erwin is surprised to find that he thinks it cute.

"What are you reading?" Erwin asks as he climbs into bed on the other side, wriggling down into the covers and pulling them up to his chin. He punches the pillow into proper form and flops down onto it.

"Essays from first-year teachers," Levi says. "Niles wants me to start thinking about possible careers for when I'm more stable, and teaching is one of them." He glances down at Erwin, mouth twitching in a reluctant smile. The lamp light from the lamp on his side of the bed glitters on the silver strands scattered through his dark hair. "Going to sleep already? You're such an old man."

"Guilty," Erwin yawns. "Arlert already had me do my career assessment. Once my prosthesis is installed, I've got a few interviews lined up with some legal organizations that're interested in workplace safety in the military."

"Safer than jumping out of airplanes all day," Levi says, returning to his book. He settles a hand on Erwin's head, scratches absentmindedly at his scalp. "You sure you're okay with me having the light on?"

"s fine. Might not sleep great tonight, but I'll just invest in sleep masks or something." Erwin can be snappy and irritable, but he's not the sort to deny someone something they need to feel safe, and having the light on is definitely something Levi needs. Erwin stretches, rolls onto his front, mashes his face into the pillow. "Night."

Levi's hand draws away from his head, rests on the space between his shoulder-blades. "Night."

"Mmmf," Erwin manages, and then relaxes into the undertow of sleep.

-

He rises to half-consciousness and makes a groggy, annoyed sound when Levi unceremoniously shoves his icy feet into the backs of Erwin's legs. His hair tickles.

"Sorry," Levi whispers, amused and apologetic all at once. His heat spreads across Erwin's back.

It's okay, it's all okay, because Levi throws an arm over Erwin's waist and tucks his face into Erwin's spine, breathing warm and steady. He's here, and that's all Erwin needs to know.

-

Falling.

The shriek of wind, keen and terrible.

The metal shakes around him, and he knows, because he has always known, what is coming.

The sharp crack of the spar separating from the frame, and the slice of black as it whips up through the air and hits his arm.

It cuts just above the elbow, saws through the bone, and he's screaming but it's muffled by his oxygen mask, the wind. Tears straight through the other side and out into air, and his arm drops away from him, sails into the emptiness. His blood arcs out into a thick curve of frozen red crystals, glittering in the sunlight-

-

Erwin jerks awake, reaching for nothing. He sucks down air in great gasps, stares at the ceiling, concentrates fiercely on the cracks in the plaster. God. Fuck. He hates this, will never stop hating it, the way the memories keep seeping up through his walls into his dreams.

Still. He's in his bedroom, in his house. Missing an arm, but alive.

"Sorry, Levi," he mumbles, but Levi doesn't answer. Erwin frowns, rolls onto his side to find Levi's side of the bed empty, the sheets rumpled. A thin line of light cuts the darkness from beneath the door.

Ah. He probably couldn't sleep and went to go finish his book. Erwin should check on him, though; simple enough to do on the way to the kitchen, while he gets some herbal tea to help him back to sleep.

Erwin gets out of bed, shuffles out of the bedroom, winces when his phantom limb makes itself known, the vicious ache returning. A stronger pain pill, then. Lamplight spills into the hallway from the living room, and Erwin follows it.

Levi's sitting on the floor, legs curled beneath him, dark head bowed as he reads his book. He's leaning against the couch, and there's a half-empty mug of tea beside him. The sight of it warms Erwin through, confirmation that Levi feels comfortable here.

Levi finishes the page he's on, then looks up. He looks Erwin up and down, then half-smiles, rueful. "Nightmare?"

Erwin nods, scratches at his chest, and heads for the kitchen. He returns with a benzo and some tea, takes the pill, and flops onto the couch behind Levi. "Okay if I crash here?" he manages, voice rough and slurred with sleep.

"Your house," says Levi, but he leans his head back into Erwin's chest. The careful weight of him is a gift, something solid.

Erwin reaches for his tea and finishes it off in slow sips, glancing once in a while at the book Levi's reading. He almost chokes on it when he realizes just what book it is.

Oh, no.

"Didn't think you the Tom Clancy type," Levi says, turning enough for Erwin to see his sly grin. "Do you have secret dreams of traveling the world and fighting badly written terrorists?"

"Everyone's allowed a guilty pleasure," says Erwin into his tea mug. His ears are bright red, he can feel it; damn it, he's never been able to hide embarrassment.

Levi stretches, T-shirt slipping down to expose a few trailing red scars and the beautiful slope of his shoulder. His eyes go heavy-lidded, voice smoky. "That's not your only guilty pleasure," he says, and grins when Erwin groans.

"It's too early in the morning for that," Erwin protests, putting his tea mug on the floor. "If you're taunting me, I'm going to sleep."

Levi's smile softens, and there's a strange, half-ironic affection in the way he butts his head into Erwin's sternum. "Sleep. I'll just keep finding out how bad your taste in books really is."

Erwin curls enough to brush his lips against Levi's temple, and sleeps, eventually.

-

He wakes, stiff and tired, face near stuck to the leather with sweat, to find Levi still leaning back against the couch. His dark head rests on his drawn-up knees as he breathes steady, quiet. The book's at his side, his place marked with a bookmark made of parachute cord from Erwin's first jump. A mortifying patch of Erwin's drool from when he snores open-mouthed darkens the collar of his T-shirt.

Oh, God.

Still. Levi didn't seem to care, didn't wake up Erwin or move away, and that he can tolerate Erwin when he's asleep and snoring and ridiculous-

That he doesn't mind the first time they shared a bed ending up with neither of them in the bed at all and Erwin snuffling into his neck-

He's a keeper.

Erwin manages to get off the couch without waking Levi, who stirs, mutters something, lapses back into sleep.

The morning light pours golden into the kitchen, turns the copper pots aflame in their rack above the island. Erwin shuffles to the refrigerator and pantry, assembles the fixings for pancakes, berry compote, coffee. He even gets out the imported stupidly expensive syrup from Canada that is actually maple syrup and not flavored and dyed corn syrup.

He turns the radio on at a low volume, listens with half an ear to the music as he fixes breakfast. Just as he has a stack of pancakes in the serving dish and the compote finishes cooking, Levi enters the kitchen, bleary-eyed, his hair a riot.

Levi stares at the covered dish of pancakes, the compote, the syrup. Drags his gaze to Erwin's face. "Smells fucking amazing."

"Glad you think so," Erwin says, carrying the dish to the table. "There's coffee if you want it."

Levi slumps into one of the chairs and shoves his hands through his hair. "Coffee. Yes." He pours himself a mug full.

"That stuff's pretty strong, you know." Erwin serves up the pancakes. "You might want some milk."

"Shut up," Levi says. "I like my coffee black. Like my soul."

Erwin almost laughs with a mouthful of pancake and compote, manages not to choke himself.

Levi takes a sip, makes the same sound he makes as when he's coming, and stares at Erwin, wide-eyed.

"This coffee has earned you all the blowjobs," he says, straight-faced, serious as a heart attack. "All the fucking blowjobs in the fucking world."

-

"Hey!" Eren, Mikasa, and Levi are waiting for Erwin outside the club, Eren shifting back and forth impatiently and Mikasa, as ever, looking perfectly composed. Levi is trying his best to look like he doesn't know Eren. "Erwin, over here!"

"He heard you the first time," Levi grouses. "The whole world probably heard you the first time." For Erwin, though, he stretches up onto his toes, and Erwin obligingly bends enough for a kiss. "Ignore him, he's all thrilled about some grade he made."

"For your information, contract law is horribly boring, and I'm happy with a B," Eren says.

"Hello," Mikasa says, accepting a handshake and leading the way into the club. "Apparently tonight's an open night; people will be showing different things on stage and then talking about it afterwards. Sounds interesting."

Eren bulls through the crowd to snag them a booth nearby the stage. For such a small man, he's quite good at getting what he wants.

"It is." Erwin's seen enough open nights to not be surprised or learn much anymore, but for young people like Mikasa and Eren, open nights are a good chance to learn, and he enjoys mentoring them if they have questions.

Levi orders first, just a Coke, and Erwin follows suit. If Levi's not drinking, then he might ask for a scene later, or Erwin might; better to be clear-headed. Mikasa and Eren are facing the stage from their side, so Levi and Erwin have to twist around to see it. There's not much Erwin hasn't seen, and Levi is more interested in jabbing his bony hips and elbows into Erwin's ribs in what he seems to think are cuddles than in watching.

It's an enjoyable time; Erwin gets to share a few stories and warnings from his time in the scene, and he and Levi both suppress their laughter at Eren's horrified squirm when the demonstration onstage moves to sounding.

Mikasa sits painfully straight and watches the demonstrations with interest, though winces and looks down when Hanji and Moblit show off genital torture.

Then it's the last demonstration for the night before the stage is opened up to everyone, and three people climb onto the stage. Erwin turns enough to see who they are, curious.

Reiner, a big blond in jeans, workboots, and nothing else, who's known for a fondness for psychological play; Annie, a small woman in nondescript clothes who moves with crisp purpose, carrying a small black leather bag; and Bertholdt, tall and skinny, entire naked body flushed red with embarrassment, extra-long leash dangling from his collar. They're a good trio, from what he's heard.

He turns back to his Coke, watches Eren and Mikasa, feeling strangely protective of them. It's always fun to see new people discovering their likes and dislikes in the kink scene, but it can be dangerous, too, especially for young people.

Levi pulls his knees up onto the booth seat, grumbling about assfucking furniture designers, and twists enough to see what's going on. Stills next to him. Goes rigid, his gaze fixed on something onstage. Tense as a tripwire.

Erwin looks. Understands instantly, as Reiner and Annie bend over Bertholdt's body onstage and light the alcohol dampening his back on fire.

Mikasa's face shines white, her eyes cold. "Get him out of here," she says, low. "Get him out quickly."

"Oh, fuck," says Eren. "Seriously, Erwin, he's going to freak-"

Erwin gets his arm about Levi's shoulders - stiff, coiled with impending violence - and half-pulls, half-encourages him out of the booth. Motions for Eren and Mikasa to stay. Levi hangs somehow limp and rigid at once, difficult to maneuver, and only Erwin's pushing him towards the door shocks him into motion. His steps are halting, stumbling things. He half-

turns to keep his eyes on the scene onstage, but Erwin steps in between it and him, studies his face.

"Levi, look at me, only at me," he says, begs, as though he can do anything against these ghosts. Like he isn't holding the closest thing he's ever known to a weapon in human form in his grip.

Levi looks gone. His gaze drifts across Erwin's face as though he sees nothing, and his mouth is a thin, flat line. He's making a sound, a low rasp of grinding teeth. There will be blood in his mouth when this is over. His eyes are terrible, an animal fixity to their gaze, as though he's seen something so hideous it's etched into his sight forever. His hands begin to curl into fists, his jaw to tighten-

Erwin grabs one of Levi's hands in his, persuades it open, keeps up his ridiculous, useless pleading.

They're moving through the crowd, making progress to the stairs, when someone stumbles into Levi, slurs something drunkenly.

It's quick as a gunshot. Levi wrenches free of Erwin's grip, making Erwin suddenly, brutally aware of the strength contained in his small frame, of how much Levi hides it. There's a horrible lack of grace to his motions. Practiced and precise, machine-like, beautiful like a bullet.

Levi grabs the interloper's arm, steps in behind him, drags it up his back. He jabs his heel into the backs of the man's knees, and the man falls to his knees on the floor with a cry, arm wrenched up. Levi's free hand settles in the curve of his jaw, thumb set behind his ear, fingers curling around his jawbone, and Erwin remembers now a dark room, the terrible panicked rage in Levi's eyes. How close he had felt to death.

"Levi!"

Levi's hands tremble. He steps back, shakes his head, and the rising devastation in his eyes pierces Erwin to the core.

The drunkard wobbles to his feet, turns, and then Hanji, beautiful, perfect Hanji, in her lab coat, swoops in from the left, dungeon monitor armband bright green in the dimness.

"Hey, Erwin! What's going on here?"

Erwin pulls Levi into himself. He's trembling, rigid, shutting down. "Levi's having a panic attack, and this guy fell into him and he didn't react well. I need to get him out of here, but can you tell this guy my name and details? I need to explain what happened to him later when he's not so drunk. Tell him he can email me, call, whatever."

Hanji's incisive gaze flicks to Levi, then to the drunk man, who's rubbing his knees resentfully. "Yeah. Sure. Room 23's open, you can take him there; I'm going to get this fellow out of the way."

"Thank you," Erwin breathes, so grateful he could kiss her, but he's got Levi to worry about. He gets them to the room.

Levi wrenches his hand from Erwin's grip, moves sharp and fast into the corner, back to the wall, gaze ricocheting from Erwin to the door to the bed. His thin shoulders heave for a moment, then seem to lock down, contain the raging fear that rules him now.

Erwin holds his hand up in silent submission and moves away from the door, perching on the rickety wooden chair beside the bed.

Levi slides down the wall into a crouch. He puts his hands on his knees, rocks onto the balls of his feet, ready to explode upwards and outwards, to kill. Surveys the room, gaze restless, near-mechanical in how it measures everything in the room for threat and then moves on. The cold, assessing eyes of special operations.

It's something like being locked in a cage with a wolf.

At last, Levi shakes himself. He blinks. Drags his gaze from the middle distance over to Erwin. There is something of an apology in the faint twist of his mouth into something not at all a smile. Then he says, voice hoarse,

"You will never fucking do that to me."

Erwin's heart breaks. He approaches, pleased when Levi shifts to one side to let him sit without comment. The floor's hard and cold, but sitting next to Levi, being allowed to be a part of this struggling back from wherever he'd gone, is worth all discomfort.

He has to struggle to keep his voice even, fails. "God, no. I'd never do that to you, not without your explicit permission, and if you never want that, I will throw away every fucking bottle of rubbing alcohol and packet of matches in the house."

Levi is, again, still beside him. He searches Erwin's face for something, some proof.

"I." Levi halts. Wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. It comes away bloody. "I believe you." He leans, so slowly Erwin barely recognizes it at first, into Erwin's side, and then Erwin realizes he's trembling, fine shudders that race over his skin and into Erwin's.

He's careful to move slowly and telegraph his movements when he lifts his arm and puts it around Levi's shoulders.

Levi allows it. Leans into his side, hesitant at first, and then harder, as though he's come to realize Erwin can bear up under his weight. Drops his dark head onto Erwin's shoulder, breathes out once, hard.

"I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be. I'm sorry I didn't realize there was going to be fireplay tonight," Erwin says.

Levi graces him with one of his fond, vaguely pitying looks. "You don't have to be." Levi's face twitches, half-crumples in misery, but he restrains himself, that same iron grip on control that Erwin wants so desperately to break. "I could have really hurt that man."

"But you didn't."

Levi tips his head back into the wall and gazes at the ceiling. He looks drained, aged beyond his years. "I-" he scrubs his hands down his legs, starts to drum his fingers on his knees, and Erwin doesn't stop him, only leans into him, offering support.

"I hate that about myself. That my first instinct is always violence." He snorts. "There's a whole sob story that explains it - violent parents, foster care, gang involvement, time in jail, joining the military - but I don't. I don't like hurting people. I never did. I did it because it was how I kept from being hurt, or how I got things I needed, or it was my duty."

"The violence in me – it makes me dangerous. And it's not something I want to be."

"It makes me feel separated from everyone else, because most people, when someone knocks into them or they feel confined, they don't lash out. They don't lose control the way I do. And it's frightening, because I never remember what I do, I just go away and come back and I have to-"

He clenches his fingers in the fabric of his pants and pulls, lets go, repeats the motion, his eyes shut tight, and Erwin can only watch him, caught in his grief, and mourn.

"Every time I have to come back and see what I've fucked up. Did I break someone's wrist? Did I give somebody a black eye? Someday, will I finally fucking go too far and do something I can't take back? Will I lose everything, and go back to the cell?"

He opens his eyes, glances at Erwin, and his voice cracks, just a little. "There's all this violence and fear inside me, and I can't- I don't want it in me anymore. It's this black sickening rot, like death, and I keep taking the pills and doing the talk therapy shit and it's just not going away. They say they saved me, and sometimes I don't know if there's enough of me left--"

Erwin can't stand it anymore, the way his words have begun to run together, the obsessive curl and release of his fingers. "Come here. Please," he says, and Levi comes into his arm, curls up bird-fragile and thin against his chest. Erwin rests his chin against Levi's hair, takes solace in it even as his heart aches. He hadn't thought grief could cut so deep.

"There will," he begins, and pauses, because all of a sudden his eyes are itching. His throat swells.

"No matter what anyone or anything can do to you, there will always be enough of you left for me." His voice splinters halfway through, and he can only breathe through it, the pain of having Levi, so strong and so brittle, trusting him with this.

Levi makes a hurt soft sound against his collarbone, a bare wisp of exhalation. Clutches at the back of Erwin's shirt.

"How can you say that?"

Erwin closes his eyes. "Because I know you. You're funny and clever and you love fancy food even if you pretend not to, and you like bad action movies, and you care so much more than you ever let anybody see. Your past doesn't define you. You're not your illness any more than I'm my missing arm, and if you flashback, then that's okay. We can move past that, if we're willing to trust each other."

Levi shifts, turns his face into Erwin's chest. He seems small like this, too small to contain the pain and love and joy that his presence in Erwin's life has become. "You should give up on me," he says at last, flat, awful, expecting nothing.

Erwin takes a deep breath. Works hard not to take offense, because even though he's done his best to show Levi he's trustworthy, Levi has lost almost all the people he ever loved. He firms his voice.

"I'm never giving up on you as long as you don't give up on me, understand? You kick me in the ass about my prosthesis and I'll do my best to help you with your PTSD, try and keep something like what happened down there from happening again. Sound good?"

"Sure, asshole," Levi mumbles. "God knows you'd die without someone looking after you."

Erwin holds him tighter, and says nothing for a while.

At last, Levi lifts his head. He's clear-eyed, grimacing. "Sorry for all that. The heart-to-heart or whatever."

"It's fine," Erwin says, and kisses him. Surprised, he rocks back against the wall when Levi slithers around to straddle him, cups his face in his hands, and kisses back, hard, biting at his lower lip, laying a string of bruises along his neck.

"I'm thinking you - ah - want something?" He settles his hand on Levi's hip, tilts his head back to give Levi all the access he wants. Rocks his burgeoning erection into the cradle of Levi's thighs.

"Clever man," Levi says, hot against his skin. "I can see why they put you in intel."

"I don't have to fuck you if you're going to run your mouth," Erwin says mildly, and Levi freezes. Erwin swallows. "Sorry-"

Then Levi's kissing the hollow of his throat, breathing, "Yes, that, let's do that. I want to get out of my head, I want you to push me out, I need it-"

"You sure?"

Levi fucking hisses, writhing against Erwin's cock, his eyes silver fire. "Yes, fuck you, I'm sure- you want me to trust you, you better trust me to know what I want."

Erwin digs his fingers into Levi's hip and leans forward, devours his mouth, Levi's hands trembling against his face.

"Fuck me, fuck me," Levi gasps against his mouth, and Erwin doesn't remember the process of bundling him out of the club, of Levi texting his excuses to Eren and Mikasa, only comes back to himself when he's in his car, aching hard in his jeans, and Levi's near shaking, fighting down moans in the passenger seat.

"What do you want?" Levi asks. His eyes are silver, dark, and he's shifting back and forth, hands clenched at his sides.

"First tell me what you need," Erwin answers, pulling out into traffic and heading for his house.

Levi hisses, an agonized sound, and snarls, "I need you to fuck me. I need you to take me out of my head and I want you to replace everything with you, with what you want. I want to blow you, I want to fuck myself on your boots, I want you to spank me, I want to feel held down."

"God," Erwin groans, and it doesn't matter that Levi's words are artless, that it's so straightforward, because the need blazing in every syllable is enough to heat his blood. "I'll give you all that, everything."

"Yes, good, now what can I give you? What do you want?" Levi's near-writhing, incendiary, his voice raw.

Erwin wishes he could adjust himself in his jeans. He wishes he could pull over and demand Levi suck his cock right on the side of the road, but Levi deserves better, deserves a bed. Erwin's throat is dry, and it takes him a moment to pull himself together, to center himself, pull on the cloak of dominance.

What he wants-

He has a bullwhip, it was one of his favorites, heavy and welting and enough to make most subs tremble, but Levi's covered his back in beautiful art and Erwin wouldn't harm those tattoos for the world-

Wait, yes. He knows.

"I have scarves. Black silk. I don't want to push you too far, not tonight, but you said you'd be willing to try limb bondage with the right partner. So I'll tie one each around your wrists, loop the free ends through those iron rings on my headboard, or the one on my wardrobe, and you'll have to hold the ends, keep yourself bound for me."

"Green," Levi says, and Erwin glances at him. His breath rushes out of him at the sight of Levi's hips rolling, squirming, wanting Erwin's hand, his mouth, and Levi - good, good, obedient Levi - has his head tipped back, his hands beneath his thighs, because he knows his cock is Erwin's. "Green, yes, let's try-"

"I'll bind you to the wardrobe first. Up on the balls of your feet, so you have to strain just a bit, so I can watch you struggle. Clamp your nipples." Erwin's grinning, wolfish, and he feels —

God, he feels on fire, like he could conquer nations, because he has this fierce wild creature tamed, wanting him, wanting him to take control, and it's, fuck, like jumping into the sky with the wind to carry you. Like flying. "I'll tie you there, and then I'll work you over, from the backs of your thighs to the top of your ass. With a paddle first, then my cane."

Levi moans, and Erwin can't look at him, has to watch the road, only sees the liquid shudder of him in the corner of his eye.

"Green," Levi manages, "but please don't make me count, it makes me obsessive, and I want to be there in the scene with you."

"Of course," Erwin says, the leather of the steering wheel cutting his palm with how hard he's gripping it.

"Then I'll untie you, make you kneel up so I can flick the clamps off you with my riding crop so it truly hurts. Make you crawl to the bed so I can watch your reddened ass sway, and you'll get up on the bed, and then, if you're very, very good-" yes, there's the turn into his subdivision, "-I'll make you hold yourself open, and I'll paddle that needy little hole of yours until it's sore and red, then eat you out-"

"Oh, God, stop," Levi snaps, half-wild, "if you keep going we are going to end this night far earlier than I planned."

Erwin pulls into the garage, and Levi's out of the car before he even comes to a complete stop. He's yanking his jacket and shirt off as he disappears through the mudroom into the kitchen, half-getting caught in them, and Erwin follows, walking gingerly with his erection trapped the way it is. He takes a moment to slip off his jacket, hang up his keys, calm down so he can be what Levi needs.

By the time he gets into the living room, Levi's naked and curled into himself on the floor, knees tucked under, his clothes carefully folded and put aside on the couch. He's beautiful, all porcelain and darkness, the tattoos near-living in the moonlight.

Erwin stops, just in front of Levi's bowed head.

Levi stretches forward, kisses the toe of one boot, and lifts his face to Erwin's. His eyes blaze silver.

"Please, sir."

All Erwin's, at last.

It's a strange feeling that twists in Erwin's heart that moment: pride, affection, need, humbleness at the enormity of what Levi's trusting him with, and the triumph of a conqueror surveying his prize. He can't possibly hope to explain it, so instead he says softly, "Of course."

-

Levi controls the trembles in his limbs with an effort. It's somehow hard to keep his attention on Erwin's face, turned into something considering and foreign and proud in the moonlight. On his eyes, glittering, and the faint sheen of sweat at his throat. Hard to not press his face to the ground and beg for Erwin, for whatever Erwin's willing to give him, because he's aching with need, with tension coiled in every fiber of his being, and Erwin can help him.

Erwin stoops, curls his hand in Levi's hair, close to the roots, the pain a dull ache at the back of his head, and pulls Levi to his feet. He tilts Levi's head back, looks deep into his eyes, hand fisting, tugging, and Levi's eyes prickle with something he refuses to let become tears. How can he be worthy of this man? This man who's seen everything terrible about him - his flashbacks, his violence, all the scars that cut deep - and finds so many things worth caring about?

He goes up onto his toes as Erwin pulls him higher, keeps his hands lax at his sides, trusts Erwin to hold him steady.

Erwin kisses him, soft, a brush of lips against lips.

Oh. Erwin's shaking, too.

He gets it now - that Erwin's nervous, too, that Erwin also wants to be worthy of him. Because Erwin somehow thinks that missing an arm is the most important thing about him, that it's unmanned him, that he's not interesting, and all Levi knows is that Erwin's the most interesting goddamn man he's ever met.

Erwin pulls away and releases his hair, runs his hand down over the slope of Levi's skinny shoulder. Finally cracks a smile, and though it's small there's enough feeling there to choke on.

"I want you to prepare how you need to. Take as long as you need. When you're finished, kneel in front of the bedroom door and knock. Don't enter until I give you permission. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Erwin's thumb, rough with calluses, settles in the hollow where his collarbones meet, the faint red mark it leaves sweet as any declaration of love. He studies Levi's face, and Levi struggles to bear up under the intimacy of it, the blessing of being known so completely. "Your safewords?"

"Red, yellow, green, sir."

"All right." Erwin pulls him forward, Levi bringing his hands up in instinctive reaction, but then he settles, because he can hear Erwin's heartbeat. Feel the heat of him against his skin. He tucks his head into Erwin's chest and breathes, the last vestige of the jittery rage from the club easing, melting. Erwin presses a kiss to the top of his head, says, voice so raw Levi's heart aches to hear it,

"Thank you." Then he lets Levi go, steps back. "Go do what you need to."

Levi manages to resist the urge to hurry through his routine, though all he wants is to say fuck it and see what Erwin has waiting for him. Bad idea, though; the faint bilious buzz of 'unclean' is starting up in the back of his mind, and if he doesn't clean himself it'll just get stronger through the scene. The shower is torturous, the heat of the water against his cock a terrible tease, so it's almost a relief to get out and dry off. He folds the towel precisely and hangs it back up, then goes to kneel in front of the shut bedroom door. Knocks once.

There's nothing audible behind the door, though he's straining to hear. No telltale shuffle of feet on carpet. No clinking of metal on metal. But really, he's being a dumbass; he and Erwin have already hashed out what's going to happen, and he should - he does - trust Erwin to hold to his word. Besides, if the silence is a test, then Erwin expects him to pass. Erwin's not the sort to set up an impossible test.

Levi takes a deep breath and bows his head, settling in to wait. The cool air of the hallway licks at his skin, draws his nipples into tight peaks. His cock is holding steady despite the temperature.

It seems like forever and no time at all until he hears Erwin's voice: "Enter."

He nudges the door open and crawls inside, the carpet rough against his knees and palms. Pauses and sits back, heart beating hard, to take in the scene.

Erwin's turned off the overhead lights, left only one lamp on, casting the room in a rich golden glow. One of the armchairs has been dragged out of the corner and positioned facing the bed, and hung on the back of the armchair are the thick rubber paddle that he loved so much, a riding crop, and another new implement: a black cane, viciously thin. Chill runs down his spine at the thought of the cutting pain it can deliver: fear and need, intermingled, inseparable. An iron ring he's never noticed has been folded down from the top of Erwin's wardrobe, a huge, sturdy thing of mahogany that outweighs them both together. And beside the armchair, arm resting across the top: Erwin.

He's in normal clothes, and the sight makes something in Levi's heart unclench. He's gotten so used to meeting doms who rely entirely on the outward signs of dominance to project power - leather, ostentatious jewelry, thigh-high boots or stiletto heels - that it's still, somehow, a gift to meet someone so assured in his dominance that he doesn't care what he's wearing, knows he can meet Levi's needs no matter what.

A simple white T-shirt, dark jeans, and his boots, freshly cleaned - fuck, fuck, Levi loves him, that Erwin knows him so deeply that he washed his boots in case Levi wants to show his devotion by licking them. He's watching Levi, the stillness of him like the moment a predator prepares to lunge, his eyes gleaming, the blue fire of them meeting Levi's own eyes, so hot they scorch his skin to look at them. His cock strains against the denim, and Levi swallows, blood pulsing hot.

"The wardrobe," Erwin says at last, and turns to walk towards it without even looking to see if Levi obeys.

He does, of course he does, because he trusts Erwin like he trusts the sun to rise in the morning, gravity to hold him to earth. He can feel himself beginning to slip, the world seeming near-fuzzy at the edges, his fears fading into the background. He stops at Erwin's left

side, glances up to find Erwin looking down at him, the skin around his eyes creased in affection. Erwin's hand slips back into his hair, and he once more guides Levi to his feet, the insistent pressure and ache forcing a moan from Levi.

Erwin lets go of his hair. "Arms out," he says, steel in his voice, and Levi obeys. Erwin pulls a black silk scarf from his pocket and steps in front of Levi. "Tell me if you need me to stop."

"Always, sir," says Levi, and Erwin rewards him with a kiss to his forehead.

"I trust you," Erwin says, and the simple statement of Erwin's faith in him matters more than anything else. Levi is a killer and a wreck and a snappy little shit and Erwin trusts him. "Give me your left hand."

Working together, they get loops about Levi's wrists, the black stark against his pale skin, paler scars, the blue deltas of veins. It's loose, though, and Erwin pauses for a moment, looks into Levi's eyes. He doesn't ask if it's too much, thank fuck, only draws the right one tight.

Levi closes his eyes. Waits for the howling darkness to drown him blind, for the terrible lightning flash of returning to blood on his hands, but finds only his heart, beating, and Erwin's hand, steady on his wrist.

Victory.

He nods, keeps his eyes closed. Frowns as Erwin pulls his tied hand up, then rocks back on his heels, startled at the wave of adoration that warms him through when Erwin kisses each one of his curled fingers, on the scarred knuckles where the Titans broke them.

Erwin drops his hand and tightens the left cuff.

Levi tenses. For a moment he's there, in the cell, struggling against the bite of handcuffs to get to Gunter, to apologize, to beg forgiveness, the obsessive cry of 'guilty' ringing in his head, but then Erwin pulls that hand up and kisses the knuckles there, too, and the confirmation that someone is there, that someone loves him regardless of his sins, draws him back from the dark.

Levi keeps his eyes closed until he slows his breathing to a regular rate. Opens them to find Erwin watching him, intent, calm, the free ends of the two scarves gathered into his huge hand.

"There you are," Erwin says, and when Levi butts his head into Erwin's chest, he laughs, kisses his temple. "Step forward." He tugs Levi towards the wardrobe and pulls his hands up, feeds the scarves through the ring, and lets go. Steps half-behind him.

Levi grabs the trailing ends and tugs, testing the sturdiness of the wardrobe, and finds no give. Handcuffs.

He tenses, jams his eyes shut, the same old keening wail of 'I'm sorry' rising in his throat, but Erwin's behind him, a solid wall of heat, his arm about Levi's chest, holding him still, holding him there. Erwin's voice in his ear, flat, commanding, like he can order the tide to stop-

"Let go."

Levi wrenches his fingers open. Could never do otherwise. His hands fall downward, released from the tension, and he watches the ends of the scarves dance in the light, spellbound.

"Color."

"Yellow, sir. But I'm handling it, I'll be fine, I'm sorry-"

Erwin's nails dig into his right shoulder, and Levi jerks, the sudden flare of pain making his cock jerk, Erwin's whiskey-and-smoke hiss in his ear another fiercer torment.

"Did I ask for you to make excuses for your needs?"

Levi swallows. His "No, sir," is a pathetic thing, and he hates it, he hates it and loves it that Erwin can make him this way, this exposed nerve ravenous for praise and affection.

Erwin's teeth are against the back of his neck, the threat present, illusory, because he knows Erwin's word is his bond. Erwin will never do something Levi hasn't agreed to. His words are a hot wash of air, and his nails rake across Levi's collarbones, settle, thumb pressing into his throat.

"Have I ever asked you to downplay or apologize for what you need?"

"No, sir."

"Good. Do you feel ready to try again?" God, fuck, he loves the certainty in Erwin's voice that he will try again, that he will be able to do this, because Erwin thinks him capable.

He answers by grabbing the scarves again. The silk rustles in his grip, and he goes up onto the balls of his feet so Erwin doesn't have to ask.

"Very good. Turn around."

It's tricky to turn around, unsteady, but he manages it, attention mostly on the sound of Erwin moving away. By the time he's gotten himself fully facing the room, Erwin's coming back, hand full of something silver and serpentine: clamps. Erwin approaches, a small, proud smile tugging at his lips, his motions sure, steady, gaze raking over Levi's body. He stops in front of Levi, Levi holding still as best he can, the ache already starting to build in his calves.

"You're beautiful," Erwin says, like it's an immutable fact. "Now, hold still while I put these on. Every flinch, every step back, gets you one more stripe from the cane."

"That's not exactly incentive to behave," Levi mutters, and Erwin grins, dangerous, leans forward to bite at Levi's neck and then breathes against his ear,

"That's one."

Levi bares his teeth in a smile, and Erwin steps back, brings the first clamp up to his nipple. It settles on in a lovely bright stab of heat and pain, digging deep, and he hisses, falls back down to flat feet.

Manages to remain still for the second, but it's a struggle. He's breathing hard, sweat on his forehead, his back. The clamps are a steady pain for now, but he knows what will come.

Erwin grips his chin, pulls his head up so Erwin can stare at him, naked and scarred and needy. Erwin says, gentle, "I have one last task for you. When I'm beating you, do not count."

It knocks the breath out of him, because he hadn't even thought of it, hadn't thought to ask. He's always counted in the scenes he's had before, since his partners wanted it, and because he has to. In stressful situations, the compulsion rules him. He hasn't in the scenes with Erwin, but that Erwin's even thought to ask, that Erwin knows him that deeply, unsettles him. That he truly doesn't know if he can do what Erwin asks hurts him more. He can't fail this man, he doesn't want to - he wants to give Erwin everything he has, everything he is, and he needs-

He forces himself to breathe. Drags up his courage, licks his lips, and whispers, "I'll try, sir. But I don't-"

Erwin's grip tightens, silencing him. "You don't have to worry about failing me. All I'm asking is for you to try, as best as you can, for as long as you can. If it gets too much, and you have to count, just do it. No need to ask me. As long as you do that, you've given me exactly what I asked for." Erwin's expression is grave, intent.

Levi works his jaw. Lets his head fall heavy into Erwin's grip. "Okay. Okay, sir. I'll try."

Erwin rests their foreheads together, then lets go of his chin and steps back. "Turn around, and get back on your toes. I'm going to begin. Be as still as you can."

Levi does, stretches himself up to grip the scarves nearer the ring, the strain already present in his shoulders. He can loosen his grip and rest his weight on his toes, or keep himself hanging off the scarves, but neither are comfortable, and he's never balanced-

Erwin's steps rustle on the thick carpet. His shadow grows large on the vast expanse of brown varnished wood before Levi's face.

Levi closes his eyes. Counts his breathing, the last time he can take solace in this tic-

The paddle slams into him. A thudding wave of pain and heat crashes into his spine, coils in his groin, exits in the grunt that escapes his clenched teeth. He writhes, tightens his grip on the scarves, and Erwin's not giving him any chance to rest, the second one lands just below the first, cutting into the thin skin at the top of his thighs-

fuck he wasn't supposed to count-

He holds onto the scarves like they're all that's left in the world, digs his fingers into the silk to try and keep himself from writhing. Fails. The scarves and his toes on the carpet are his

only anchors to something besides the pain working its way down into his knees, up his spine, every blow heralded by the sudden lick of air at his skin. He keeps his teeth clenched, though the impacts jolt sounds out of him. He won't break yet. Not this early. Not this easily. His cock jerks with each hit, the heat and thud rushing into him, flint to steel.

The beating pauses. He lifts his head, works his jaw to loosen the muscles, and breathes. The sensation's ebbed from its sharp intensity, settled into his muscles, his bones. A pleasant feeling, all his nerves alight.

"Spread your legs."

Fuck. He snarls into the wall, but does it, because the twisted part of him that's grown used to pain craves it, all the more so if he can be praised for it. If he is violent, and he is, at least this gives that dark side an outlet-

His thoughts splinter and go silent when Erwin slaps him twice on each thigh with the heavy paddle, his mind washed clean by the shock. He hopes the marks will be as red as the slash of pain behind his eyelids. He moans, rocks forward, unbalanced. His grip slips on the scarves, and he knocks his nose into the wardrobe. He reels back, barking,

"Fuck!" Of all the stupid ways to get knocked out of a scene, he has to trip over his own damn feet and nearly brain himself on a fucking wardrobe-

Behind him, Erwin is struggling not to break down in unmanly giggles. Not doing a very good job of it, either. "Step back, close your legs, and remain there." A beat. "Color?"

Levi releases one of the scarves and opens his eyes, using the hand to prod at his nose. No blood, no crunching, just a little bruised. "Green. One second." He feeds the scarf through the ring and grabs the free end, bringing his legs together.

The soft scuff of the carpet means Erwin's returned. The hiss that slices the air means he has the cane.

Levi's mouth has gone utterly dry. He's tried the cane once before, wasn't sure how he felt about it - mostly hate - but he trusts Erwin to make it good, the way he always does. Sweat runs cold down his spine, and he digs his fingernails into his palms. Shifts, but can't get comfortable, knowing what's waiting. He struggles not to tremble.

"Remember," says Erwin, controlled, absolutely composed, "you have your safewords."

It's a terrible effort to whisper, "Yes, sir."

The hiss as the cane whips through the air.

The impact, a perfect horizontal line across the top of his ass.

Then, a moment that hangs, suspended, before the ice rises in the cane's wake, carves deep, a bite that goes to the bone. It's as though his skin's been torn from him, left him a raw nerve, humming and twisting and defenseless-

"Oh my god," he shouts, shocked, rigid, all his muscles locked against the tidal wave of agony, "fuck that, fuck you-"

Erwin slashes the cane into him again.

The pain grows, builds, he's immersed in it, trapped by it. He can't escape it, is caught by his own grip on the scarves, his own stubborn refusal to bend, whatever's broken in him that makes him read the pain as pleasure, as something worth enduring.

Erwin lays precise stripes up and down his thighs, his ass, each one precisely spaced, each one kindling to the fire that's consuming Levi whole, leaving him stripped clean, nothing but pain and the awareness of pain.

Each stripe is a chink in the armor, building, and he's trying so damn hard to keep it together, grunting through clenched teeth, digging his toes into the carpet. It's impossible. The heat and pressure are rising, twisting up his spine, his muscles locked and he can't-

Bit by bit, grain by grain, he's giving up. Letting himself gasp. Allowing himself to move, even though it doesn't help him to escape. It's an agony, this final giving in, this scrambling to hold onto control even as it slips through his fingers because he can't hold it any longer.

He's writhing and twisting and panting, gulping for breath, his sight blurred with horrible tears, because he can't cry, he won't cry, it won't do any good, not now-

But Erwin wants him to cry, and he's mourned their losses, and what good will not crying do? There's no one left to sacrifice, no intelligence to protect for the greater good that was neither, and maybe-

Erwin's seen him black out, seen him unable to sleep for lack of a gun, been hurt by him and seen him nearly hurt another, knows his whole fucked up history, and still he's there, still he's reaching, knocking on the door-

Because Levi's valuable, because Levi gives him something he can't get anywhere else: respect and affection and understanding and strength that grows in the ceding of it, and it's a relationship of equals, really, Erwin won't judge his tears because to see him naked and hurting and strong is what Erwin wants-

And Levi, fuck him sideways six ways to Sunday, is more than a bit in love with Erwin. Erwin would never ask him for something he is incapable of giving.

His tears are an easy gift.

The cane bites deep, laid across the other welts, and Levi buckles, Levi cracks. A terrible wounded sob rips deep from his chest, carries years of pain with it. Tears trail in unfamiliar paths down his face. He lets go of the scarves, falls back to his feet, and wavers, shaking, weeping, unable to stop. Reeling and spinning and stuck somehow, in his body, in his skin, in this moment, and there's no room in him for memory or grief or guilt: only enough room in his battered frame for pain, and it's enough, it's a gift. He's won, he's given in, he's done what Petra asked: let the world in.

Erwin says something, but it takes him a moment to process, the word spoken in a foreign language, something he once knew: "Yellow." Then Erwin's behind him, grasping his shoulder, turning him around, and Levi stares up into Erwin's wrecked, awed face and tries to smile.

"Oh," says Erwin, and he pulls Levi into him. They sink, together, to the ground, Levi an awkward twisted form of elbows and knees and too many tears, but Erwin's got him, Erwin's holding him safe. Erwin's trousers burn his ass and thighs, but it's worth it for Erwin's voice in his ear, trembling with emotion,

"My good, good boy. So beautiful, god. Are you all right? Did I go too far?"

Levi hiccups, clenches his fists in Erwin's shirt, and burrows into Erwin's chest. The clamps on his chest throb, like claws digging into his lungs. Words crowd his mouth, but he can't pick the right one. Tears itch on his cheeks. He's shaking, and he's sore, and he loves it, and at last summons up the strength to say,

"No. No. I'm good. I'm. I feel... wonderful."

Erwin rocks them both back and forth, his chin on the top of Levi's head. He blows out a relieved breath. "All right." He hesitates, then says, whispering it like something holy, "You're beautiful when you're hurting. When you give in. Thank you for allowing me to make you."

Levi's an ugly crier - no one looks good weeping - but even though his nose is bright red, his eyes red-rimmed and lashes clumped with tears, he believes Erwin. Erwin doesn't lie.

They rest, twined together. All of Levi is tuned to the throb of pain and the beat of Erwin's heart beneath his ear. He sits up, in the end, scrubs at his face with the back of one hand, and says, "You promised me more."

Erwin laughs, expression one of absolute delight. "You're right. Remiss of me to forget." He tightens his grip on Levi one more time, then nudges him away. "Kneel on the floor, facing me. Hands at your side, chest out."

Levi clambers off Erwin's lap and does as he's told. It's a terrible relief to let his arms hang loose at his sides, and even the sight of Erwin prowling back to him, riding crop swinging in his hand, doesn't dim the sheer pleasure of the new position.

Erwin's smile is half-predatory, half-affectionate, and Levi snuffles and looks up at him. There's no fear in him now. He could never truly fear this man.

The tip of the crop touches his chin and lifts his head up farther. Erwin's gaze drops to the clamps, and the silver chain slithering across his scarred chest. His voice is somehow level, the shaking need and gratitude from earlier clamped down.

"Earlier, you said you wanted to fuck my boot." He slides one foot forward between Levi's thighs, nudging them apart. The laces rub a burning row down the underside of Levi's cock, pinned between them and his own body. "Now's your chance. While you're doing that, I'm

going to get these clamps off you. Put your hands behind your body and arch your back to display yourself for me, and fuck my boot the way you want me to fuck you."

Levi stares up at him, silent. He would find the act - outside of this room - to be humiliating, filthy, but Erwin doesn't say it like it's a humiliating thing, like Levi's lesser for doing it. He says it like it's the most desirable thing he can think of, like Levi's giving him a gift. So Levi plants his hands behind him and does just what he asks, cheeks burning.

His heels dig into his battered thighs and ass, make him flinch. His cock twitches, and he can't get used to the twisted feelings: the cold hard slickness of the boot building him up, then the terrible abrasion of the laces curling deep. He's dripping, smearing precome across the black leather, and he moves faster, groaning, balls hitting the steel toe of the boot and leaving him panting with the thick twist of agony in his belly-

"Yesss," Erwin hisses, dropping his hand and the crop to the hard outline of his own cock in his jeans, molding his fingers over it, stroking, and Levi whines, wants to butt his hand aside and seal his own mouth over Erwin. "God, you, on your knees for me, fucking yourself for me-"

Levi moans, a high, thready, fucking needy sound, and his cock is wet and red and he almost feels like he's bleeding, like the pain of Erwin's laces is cutting him, but it's a good pain, because he's looking up into Erwin's dark triumphant eyes and he would do anything, suffer anything, to keep Erwin looking at him like that.

"Please," he slurs, but he doesn't know what he's asking for - permission to keep going, immersing himself in pain, the command to stop - and Erwin grins, his teeth sharp and white in the low light.

"Please, what?" The crop snaps out and down, just kisses the head of Levi's cock with a trail of fire, and Levi shouts, writhes, but keeps his hands on the ground, his knees, and god, he's crying again, because he forgot, god damn it, he forgot-

"Please, sir!"

Erwin slashes the crop twice more against the clamps, air rushing against his chest, and then the clamps are gone, dropping into air, tumbling to a stop against the carpet. His chest is a wound, his nipples two sharp points of pain, and he wants to touch them but he can't-

"Keep going," Erwin says, low, his smile like a wolf that sees the wounded deer, and Levi sobs, then grits his teeth and does it. Closes his eyes, and each thrust is worse and better than the last, his muscles drawing tight, his toes curling, every bone alight with the driving need to come.

Erwin traces his body with the tip of the crop, from the tip of his cock to his chin, the wet leather a torment. "Stop," he says, and Levi freezes, trembling, pushed to the edge. Inches open his eyes to find Erwin looking at him, soft, wondering, before he's the predator again. His boot rises up into Levi's body, the sole scraping his cock raw, and then with boot and crop he pushes him back.

Levi falls onto the carpet, sprawls. His heart thunders, he can't catch his breath; he's naked, his chest red and marked, his cock wet and erect, and the carpet rubs him horribly.

Erwin looks every single solitary inch of him over, from his trembling hands to the shuddering curls of his toes. His nostrils flare, he's breathing hard, absolute possession etched in every line of his face. He drops to one knee. It's like a mountain falling, like something he never thought he could have in his grasp coming closer, and Levi rolls onto his side.

Grabs Erwin's calf and curls around it, knots his fingers in Erwin's laces and kisses his boot, the taste strange: his tears, his come, leather. He's wild with this need to be close, to express his absolute devotion, whining and trembling and licking, more naked now than he ever was in the grip of the Titans.

Erwin's fingers drift through his hair, slow, gentle, and Levi doesn't know how to handle this, this unstinting affection from someone who can break him so beautifully. He gasps for breath, keeps shaking.

At last he realizes that Erwin's saying something. "Shhh, shh, good boy," and other praises, stroking his shoulders, his back, gentling him, pulling him back from that precipice and putting him into his own body, leading him to remember the names of his own bones, the maps of his scars. He stills. Sighs. Leaves one last kiss on Erwin's boot, and tilts onto his back.

Erwin cups his head as he goes, supports his neck, thumb in the secret hollow where his voice resides. His hand slides away to span Levi's chest.

Levi blinks up at Erwin.

Erwin's eyes are wide, wet. There are drying trails on his cheeks. He looks devastated, humbled by Levi's obedience and surrender. "Thank you," he says, the words eking out of his throat like they hurt to say. He clears his throat. Bends to press his face into Levi's throat. His voice is thick. "Thank you."

Levi manages a sound. Arches, artless, into Erwin's mouth as Erwin kisses down his neck, his chest, breath hot against his cock.

Erwin glances up his body, brow raised. "I think you deserve a reward. Color?"

There's no anxiety in Levi. No fear of contagion. Levi grins, murmurs, voice hoarse, "Green, please, sir." The heat of Erwin's mouth scalds as he takes Levi between his lips, hand resting on his hipbone, and Levi sighs, rolls his hips into Erwin, the pressure and heat and the knowledge that it's Erwin doing this more than enough. It's painful in its own way, the slick curl of Erwin's tongue about the bottom of his cock, rubbed red, a flare of heat, but the overwhelming sensation of joy is enough to have him clawing at the carpet.

Erwin hums, hollows his cheeks and sucks, and Levi howls, writhes, the carpet scraping his back, because it's so good and so terrible, this hunger he can't escape. Erwin's consuming him, learning every last weakness with the intense focus of a sniper.

Erwin's hand leaves his hip, gropes for Levi's hand, finds it. They curl their fingers together, palms pressed hot and sweaty, an anchor.

Erwin strips him to the core as efficiently as he does everything else: tries every trick in the book, even lets Levi's cock brush against his teeth in silent threat. The air is full of the sound of his enjoyment: wet, filthy, amazing sounds, and when he drags off Levi's cock, looks him straight in the eye, and says with slick and shining lips, voice hoarse,

"I love your cock,"

Levi jerks, groans as he just manages not to come. "God, stop saying that, sir, you're going to kill me."

Erwin's hair is falling into his eyes, gold on blue. It's a wreck, the way it was when Levi found him in the kitchen that morning, and his heart twists at the memory.

"I don't think my dirty talk's ever going to kill anyone," Erwin says, squeezing Levi's hand, "but this might if I manage it correctly, it's been a while." He gazes at Levi with nuclear intensity. "Don't come until I let you."

Levi swallows. Nods, too curious and half-afraid for speech.

Erwin flashes him a quick smile, then bends over him and swallows him down to the root in one smooth go.

Levi nearly jackknives right off the floor, but Erwin's grip is crushing his hand, the sudden pain a reminder, and so he can only lie there and shake, gasping for breath, eyes shut tight. Every solitary single inch of him focuses on the wet tight heat of Erwin's throat; the way it ripples around him when Erwin swallows; the loud rasp of Erwin's breathing through his nose.

His toes curl so hard his feet cramp. His back and shoulders are drenched in sweat, stinging in the welts, he's so hot even though the room is cool, and he can't breathe, can't remember anything but this moment, enduring, can't hold on-

He gives in.

"Please, sir," he says, trembling, drawn into a thread.

Erwin taps 'Yes' into the back of his hand in Morse, and Levi laughs, the sound dissolving into a moan, into a sigh, and silence, as he twists, heels drumming on the ground, and comes. Light fragments behind his eyelids.

Erwin swallows him down and pulls off, a loud sound filling the air, and kisses Levi's cock one last time, tip of his tongue flickering into his slit in a stinging goodbye, before getting off his knees. Erwin's focused, hungry, the air around him still. "Crawl to the bed and get on your knees."

He wants nothing more than to sag into the floor, but Erwin's his CO, and he refuses to disobey orders. Levi fumbles his way to hands and knees, Erwin watching him in silence, his

attention like a brand, and crawls to the bed. He's all too aware of his caned and paddled ass and thighs, of Erwin's gaze on them. He would be humiliated, but this is Erwin, and nothing he gives Erwin is humiliating. Levi manages to get onto the bed, the motions pulling at stiff muscles, and waits.

"Head and shoulders on the mattress. Take a pillow if you want to, it's more comfortable. Hands on your ass. Hold yourself open for me." Erwin stalks back to the chair that, Levi realizes with a swell of need, is placed so that Erwin can stare right at all his most secret parts. Erwin takes a seat, riding crop swinging.

Levi closes his eyes, cheeks flaming red, and obeys, digging his fingernails into his cheeks to leave himself utterly exposed to Erwin.

"Lovely," says Erwin, reverent. His voice drops, twines around Levi like smoke. "Stay just like that, my sweet boy."

Levi takes a deep breath. "Yes, sir."

Something licks across his entrance in tongues of flame, stinging, working its way in. He groans and digs his fingers in harder, head turned to the side to breathe, the sheets smooth as water against his cheek.

Again, a thud and then the wave, drawing his attention to one sharp point, until every thought he has, every inch of him, is attuned to how empty he feels, how achingly aware he is of wanting something inside him. How much he wants to be broken open, brought low. His entrance keeps twitching, clenching with need for whatever Erwin gives.

A harder slap makes him yelp, muffle his mouth by pressing it into one sweaty shoulder. He can't stop twitching, writhing, but he keeps his knees planted with force of will. Oversensitive because of Erwin's mouth, he's struggling to embrace the pain, sink into it the way he's grown used to doing.

He can just see Erwin if he tries: his eyes, the ferocity of his expression as he swings the flogger back and lets it sail, the low rumbles of possession he doesn't seem to be aware of making.

"Yes," Erwin says when one particular lash makes Levi sob, his own breath a humid curl against his shoulder. "Let me hear you. Those sounds are mine."

So Levi lets himself whine and yelp and sob, all the sounds he made in the dark that meant nothing, but here they mean something to Erwin, here they're valued. Here he's treasured.

"You've gone so red," Erwin says, the flogger falling to the floor. The chair creaks as Erwin gets to his feet. "All sore and sensitive, God, I can imagine how you'll feel when I fuck you. You'll be so sweet for me, won't you? Stay."

Levi manages to keep still as he watches Erwin remove his shirt, bicep rippling, to expose his muscular chest. Digs his fingers and toes into the sheets in silent agony as Erwin methodically unlaces his boots, steps out of them, and places his socks inside each one. Is

half-panting and writhing by the time Erwin, his mouth a sharp slant of a grin, undoes his zipper with excruciating slowness and peels his jeans down his legs. He's gone fucking commando, his cock, blunt and red, bobbing erect to smear wet across his flat belly.

He wants Erwin in him now, the way he's never wanted something, and as Erwin stalks toward him like some war god from myth, Levi's mouth has gone dry. He's trembling, afraid and uplifted, safe in Erwin's bonds.

Erwin's knee depresses the bed beside Levi's foot, and then Erwin's touching him, brutal hand curling about his shoulder, pushing him down.

"On your back. Hands above your head on the headboard," Erwin says softly, a bare whisper. "I'm going to have you slowly."

He'd been honest, hadn't he, in that scene in this room, when he'd told Levi he'd make him accept gentleness? Even when Levi had told him over and over again that he doesn't deserve it, can never deserve it after the cell. But he's starting to think, now, that silence and exile aren't the way to honor his dead.

They gave him his life.

It would do them far greater dishonor not to live it.

He might not be able to take this, to allow himself to be so open, but he can try. As long as he tries, he's following orders. Levi rolls onto his back, pulls his knees up to rest against Erwin's waist.

"Put some pillows under yourself," Erwin says. His mouth twitches in a smile. "It'd be pretty upsetting if I dropped you."

Levi rolls his eyes, but grabs a few of the ridiculous amount of pillows on the bed and crams them underneath his hips.

Erwin's looming above him, hand planted beside his shoulder. The heat coming off him beats against Levi, their sweat-slick skin rubbing against each other. Erwin's eyes are near-black in the light, sweat turning his hair to bronze, the way his breathing rasps through his flared nostrils making Levi shiver. He looks utterly animal, prepared to devour.

All Levi has to do is let it happen. It's a gift, this freedom. He tilts his head back to bare his throat, and Erwin kisses it, licks the sweat on one tendon, sucks a mark into the hollow like the jewel in a necklace. Then Erwin's kissing his mouth, gentle, the whisper of his breath across Levi's lips a cruelty.

Erwin sits back and fishes out a black rubber glove, snaps it onto his hand. Then he snatches some lube out from somewhere, flips the cap open, and hands it to Levi. "I'll need your help with this one," he says, and Levi has to smile. He squeezes out a large amount onto Erwin's fingers, then tosses the tube aside.

Erwin's fingers just brush against him, and he jolts, overheated mind setting up a symphony of *yes* and *more* and *now*. He licks his lips, shifts on the pillows, glorying in the dulled pain of his abrasions against the fabric. Erwin's heartbeat, the rasp of his breathing, resonates where his knees rest on Erwin's sides, and he's never felt closer to another person than in this moment.

"You're so goddamn beautiful," Erwin says, low, enraptured, gaze fixed on where his huge fingers swirl strange patterns over raw skin. "Tears on your face, your ass marked from my flogger, all shining and red and hot for me, here-" he presses, and Levi sighs, opens up easy, Erwin settling inside him as though he'd never left. Words are unnecessary. Thought is unnecessary. All he has to do is give in, let Erwin sweep him up in the storm.

"So good," Erwin says. His burning eyes flick up from where his one finger curls just inside Levi to Levi's face. "I need your attention now."

"Yeah," Levi says, but his own voice seems distant. He jerks when Erwin bends and bites at his hipbone, snarls, "What?"

Erwin doesn't look very apologetic for breaking him out of that lovely slide sideways: only leans forward and kisses him. He draws away, serious. "I need you to promise me something. While I'm stretching and entering you, you shouldn't hurt at all. It might be uncomfortable, sure, but not actively painful. Promise me that if you feel any pain, any at all, you'll tell me."

Levi swallows, overwhelmed again at just how deeply Erwin takes his responsibility to care for Levi. He nods, stirring the sweat-drenched hair sticking to his forehead. "Yes, sir. I promise, sir."

Erwin smiles, then sits back on his knees and continues working Levi open. There's no impatience in him, no annoyance at how Levi shifts and squirms, unsure how to deal with this much exposure, this vulnerability. He only pauses, waits for Levi to settle, and then continues. Slides another finger inside, and Levi's back arches at the unfamiliar pressure, a deep moan rising out of him and into the air. Just as Erwin said, there's no pain, only the driving need to be fucked.

Levi drops his head back on the bed and breathes. Every twitch of Erwin's fingers inside him rolls through his bones in thunder, brands itself on his skin like lightning scars. He's melting, tension slipping from his muscles, his mind, thoughts circling in on themselves until they fall silent, coaxed into quiet by Erwin's patient guidance. He's falling sideways again, aware only of Erwin's presence, everything else unimportant.

He half-opens his eyes as Erwin slips a third finger inside of him, aching rim accepting the newest intrusion with a sweet flare of pain. Sighs as Erwin just skates about the edge of his prostate, the slow honey of arousal rolling up his spine, his half-erect cock twitching. Even that fades, everything washed out and secondary in the blazing light of how close he is to Erwin, how his heart brims and nearly spills with adoration.

Erwin's looking at him wide-eyed, mouth twisted in a helpless smile.

Levi frowns, tries to think why Erwin's smiling, but then Erwin shakes his head and crooks his fingers, the slight motion pushing out a soft moan.

"Shh, Levi," Erwin says, gloved fingers slipping from Levi's body and leaving him aching, hungry. "No need to come up yet, darling, stay down there." He pulls the glove off with his teeth and flings it aside, then rests his hand on Levi's knee where it's pressed against his side. His hand trembles, then his expression calms, steadies. He twists to grab the lube and slicks his cock before tossing the lube aside.

Levi accepts the order and lets the confusion drift from his mind. Everything he is is focused on Erwin, on the sudden heat of Erwin's cock nudging at him.

"Breathe out," Erwin whispers, and Levi does. It's impossible to disobey, not when he trusts this man this much. Erwin makes a strained, hurting sound, and then he's just inside, a welcomed invasion that breaks Levi open, leaves him open-mouthed and breathless. He clenches on instinct, and Erwin freezes, groans, hand tight on Levi's ankle. His eyes blaze. His lips shine, wet and bitten, kiss-swollen.

They hang, suspended.

At last, Levi eases, and Erwin slips in just a little further. He's huge, taking up all the space Levi has to offer, and with every half-inch taken, he has to stop, trembling. Grits out praise and curses intermingled, voice raw. Sweat rolls down his nose and drops onto Levi's belly, his expression strained, tight, exalted.

Levi gazes up at him. His back and ass ache, his nipples two dull points of pain, but he's safe. He's wanted. He's loved.

He closes his eyes and gives in.

Erwin slides fully into him with a surprised moan of, "Levi, fuck." His hand drops from Levi's ankle, and he plants it by Levi's shoulder, the bed dimpling beneath the pressure. His heart hammers, and when Levi opens his eyes again, Erwin's hunched over him, breathing hard, ravenous.

"Hold on," Erwin says, and Levi firms his hands against the headboard.

Erwin begins to pull out, leaving Levi crying out, twisting, clenching to keep him in, and Erwin swears, lunges forward to kiss Levi hard, stealing his breath. They're too close, their breath mingling. Levi can count Erwin's eyelashes, see his pulse hammering in the blue veins beneath his eyes. Something is very important, something he needs, and it is the hardest goddamn thing he has ever done to organize his thoughts enough to speak.

"Permission to touch you, sir?" The words seem foreign in his mouth.

Erwin slides back into him, pushing the breath from his lungs with the deep furious pulse and pressure of him, and whispers, "Granted."

Levi rips one hand off of the headboard and curls his fingers in Erwin's hair, holds on for dear life. Erwin grins, snaps his hips back into Levi, and Levi yelps, too far gone to care about the sound, the naked vulnerability in it.

Erwin's fucking him slow, hard, every thrust making him grunt, Levi whine, and he's talking-

"God, I love this, I love you, you're so fucking sweet for me, so tight and hot and god, everything I want you give, you take everything I do and give it back better-" Erwin gulps for breath, rhythm stuttering, "You make me a better man." His hips hitch into Levi, abrading his welts again, wonderfully, and then he's lost, grinding into Levi, moaning deep in his chest. He throws his head back like a lion about to roar, the powerful muscles of his chest and shoulders clenching.

Levi revels in the sudden slickness inside him, the mark of possession. The way's easier for Erwin to slide out, shuddering as he does, though Levi shifts, murmurs discontent, the slow curl of arousal in his belly unsatisfied.

Erwin bends to kiss him again, wraps his hand about Levi's cock, and persuades him up, into the clouds, into that place beyond time or space or thought. Into the light, and the roar of air.

Levi arches, howls, breath punched out of him, only a wire burning electric, grounded by Erwin's control, Erwin who takes him safely home after the leap into void.

He falls.

Chapter End Notes

Title from Vienna Teng's 'Never Look Away.' Comments, kudos, bookmarks, and criticism are adored. Talk to me on Bluesky [here](#) (18+ only) or check out my other social media [here](#) if you'd like.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: brief discussions of torture and the aftermath of torture.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Erwin's just about to get a hellish crick in his back from leaning against the headboard, Levi sprawled across him, head tucked beneath his chin, when Levi shifts on top of him, fingers tightening on Erwin's hand where it rests on the concave curve of Levi's belly. He makes a disgruntled sound and turns his face into Erwin's shoulder.

"Back with me, then?" Erwin says.

"Mmm," Levi manages. "How long?" His voice is rough, warm, slurred with impending sleep.

"Not too long. A few minutes." Erwin starts to untangle their fingers, but Levi protests with an inarticulate grunt and hangs on even harder. "I'm just getting you some water. I've got an apple, too."

"Don't want your food." Levi flops off of Erwin's chest and somehow turns around to end up curled in a content parenthesis next to Erwin's legs, still holding his hand. "This is good."

"Just one bite? And a sip or two?"

Levi opens one eye to stare Erwin down, though the imprint of the sheets into his cheek and his disastrous hair don't lend themselves to his attempt. "Will it make you happy?"

Erwin can't stop from smiling. He squeezes Levi's hand, then pulls his hand away. "Very happy."

Levi relinquishes his grip with ill grace. "Okay." He takes the apple Erwin hands him, takes one bite, and then seems to realize he's ravenously hungry. He devours the fruit like a wolf, teeth tearing, juice running down his chin until Erwin bends down to kiss it off.

Levi tosses the apple core into the trashcan and curls one sticky hand about the back of Erwin's neck, kissing back, clumsy and sweet.

At last Erwin has to sit up lest his back register an even firmer protest. "How do you feel?" He cards his fingers through Levi's hair, glancing down Levi's body to check on the forming bruises, the rug burn, the welts. It's still difficult, even after all these years in the scene, to look at the remnants of a hard scene and not feel guilty.

Levi stretches, luxurious, groaning deep in his chest. "Bit sore, but good. Wonderful." He rolls onto his back, hissing at the contact. "Really good."

"I'm glad," Erwin says into the hush, loathe to disturb the peaceful moment. His fingers still in Levi's hair. "Is there anything you need? Anything I can do?"

Levi butts his head back into Erwin's hand.

An easy request.

"Was I-" Levi pauses, glances up to catch Erwin's gaze, expression tense and still, "-good? It was good?"

The shy vulnerability in the question melts Erwin's heart. "You were wonderful, Levi. Perfect. You gave me everything I wanted, things I didn't even know I wanted." He stoops to kiss Levi's forehead. "Thank you."

Levi's smile is a small, private thing, more evident in the relaxing of his brow and the lines around his eyes than on his lips, but it's all the more beautiful for it.

"Was I good for you?" For Erwin, it's the most important question he can ask, and any partner that doesn't ask it isn't worth the time of day.

Levi frowns at him. "You were perfect."

"There wasn't anything I did that you didn't like, or didn't do that you wanted me to do?"

"Urgh." Levi flails for the glass of water and takes a huge gulp, then puts it back on the nightstand and slithers up Erwin's body until he's looking at him face to face. "You were great, I feel great, I'd feel better if we could take a nap. Do you always ask this many questions?"

"It's part of how I process, yeah." Erwin can't even be annoyed at Levi casting aspersions on his questions: not when Levi's naked and marked by his ropes and paddle, his hair a terrible mess, his lips red from Erwin's kisses.

Levi frowns and pitches forward into Erwin's shoulder. His chin digs into Erwin's collarbone, and Erwin's starting to want to register Levi's knees, elbows, and chin as lethal weapons, they're so painfully pointy. "If it's important to you, I'll answer them."

That he's willing to answer, to compromise, is another stone on Erwin's grave. He is so stupidly fond of this man, it's going to kill him. "They can wait until after we've had a nap."

"Oh, thank God," Levi breathes, and Erwin has to laugh.

They end up curled together under the covers, Levi's face mashed into Erwin's chest, one leg flung over Erwin's hip. He's warm and still and quiet, and Erwin loves him, will possibly always love him.

They sleep a while, drowsing in the lamp light, Erwin's arm draped over Levi's side. It's that press of skin to skin that alerts Erwin to the fact that something's wrong, that Levi's shaking, his breathing fast and shallow against Erwin's chest. His skin's chilled, clammy.

"Levi?" Erwin murmurs, swimming up from the darkness, glancing down to find Levi curled tight against him, palms flat against his ears. "What's wrong?"

"Cold," Levi manages. "Feel like shit." His voice wavers, and he growls, sound thick with tears. "Fucking drop, I hate it, I hate being so out of control."

"Hey, look at me."

Levi does, and his mouth is set in a line of misery, his eyes red-rimmed.

Erwin moves back a little bit to give Levi some space to answer. "What's good for you when you're dropping? Do you want me to touch you?"

Levi swallows, eyes darting away. "I."

"Whatever you want," Erwin says, low, propping his head up on his hand. "Just tell me what you need, I won't be offended."

"Don't touch me," Levi says, all in a rush, "but stay close? Talk to me? About anything, something stupid. You could even read your shitty Tom Clancy, I never finished it. Or some other book, whatever."

"Sounds fine." Erwin rolls onto his side to reach for the book on his nightstand, then sits up against the headboard, finding his place. It's nonfiction, a biography of the man who founded the Intelligence Department, and just boring enough to put him to sleep while being interesting enough that he wants to keep going. He reads, until Levi's shaking eases, until his fingers uncurl from over his ears, and the knotted curves of his ribs rise and fall in gentle waves.

"-developed the first ideas for a new definition of operational security with regard to signals intelligence. This, of course, was after several debacles involving improper storage and security of cryptographic keys-

"I think I'm good," Levi says, turning onto his back and sprawling, one hand settling on Erwin's shin. His fingers are warm now, and leave charcoal stains where they touch. "Thank you."

"Always welcome." Erwin sets the book aside. "Still sleepy?"

Levi frowns, drums his fingers on Erwin's leg. "A little. I could eat, though."

"I'm pretty wiped out," Erwin says. "I don't know if I've got the energy for a big meal."

"Cereal," Levi decides, and twists off of the bed and pads from the bedroom, gloriously un-self-conscious.

Erwin has to follow.

They end up eating whole-grain organic cereal standing naked at the counter, the room lit only by the streetlights outside, and when Erwin, ravenous all of a sudden, sticks his hand straight in the cereal box and stuffs a handful into his mouth, Levi - beautiful and bruised and grinning wild - says, apropos of nothing,

"Goddamn, I love you, you idiot."

Erwin pauses in mid-chew, and Levi, rolling his eyes, pulls Erwin down to his level, stretches onto his toes, and kisses him, in a kitchen that smells of sweat and cereal and all things good and bright and beautiful.

-

The call comes as Erwin's in Dr. Arlert's office, discussing his feelings about the upcoming operation to implant the shoulder socket for his prosthesis. Their phones go off at the same time, and Erwin reaches for his, frowning at the sight of 'Eren' blinking on the screen.

"Eren?" he asks, just as Dr. Arlert says, "Mikasa?"

They lock eyes. Dr. Arlert looks guilty.

"Hey, Erwin," Eren says, his voice humming with tension. "Have you heard anything from Levi the last two days?"

"Mikasa, I'll see you in a bit," Dr. Arlert says from a distant shore, but Erwin can't really pay attention, he's too tuned to the fear in Eren's voice, the fear bubbling up through his gut to grab his heart and pull.

"No, not since he spent the night. Why?"

"Um. He's been in his apartment, and he's not answering the door or his phone, and we don't really want to get the super to open the door for us, because Levi's kind of paranoid, and we don't want to freak him out. We don't know what's going on."

"Okay," Erwin manages. "I'll be there as soon as I can." He lurches to his feet and turns for the door, ears humming, vision swimming, but Dr. Arlert's at his side, trotting after him while he calls for Hannes to cancel his appointments.

"Erwin, here, come with me, I'll drive us there."

He will never remember getting into Dr. Arlert's car. He remembers only the light swallowed up and dying in Levi's dark eyes as he spoke of Titans, and what they had done.

He stares outside at the city passing by, his eyes itching with the urge to close them and block out the world, but he can't do that. What if Levi needs him? He focuses instead on Dr. Arlert beside him, driving quickly, carefully.

"So you know Levi." The words seem to just squeak through his throat, tightened and dry.

"Yes." Arlert takes a hard left onto the highway, and they're soaring above the buildings, those offices and apartments where Titans might hide, watching the world through blinds and curtains, waiting to burn it down. "Eren and Mikasa are my roommates, my best friends. I've known them both since childhood, and when they brought Levi with them to the city, I got to know him, too."

Erwin swallows. Digs his fingers into his knees. "Guess you couldn't tell me you knew the guy I'm dating."

Arlert barks a laugh. "No, that'd break all sorts of rules, and it'd make you censor yourself, which, since I'm supposed to be a safe space, would be an impediment to your progress." They sail down off the highway and into the quiet, tree-lined streets of Levi's neighborhood, taking a few turns until they're onto the street where Levi's apartment is.

"Sorry, if it was embarrassing to hear me talk about your friend like that."

Arlert waves it off as he slides the car into a parking space. "Embarrassing, yes, but I'm happy for you both. Besides, I've perfected the poker face." He puts the car into park, and Erwin half-wrenches the handle off as he leaps out of the car. He jogs towards the entrance, where Eren's in the shadows, smoking a cigarette with trembling fingers.

"Eren. Any news?"

Eren twitches at the sound of his voice, looks up, and there's something feral and terrible in his green eyes that makes Erwin take a step back. Then Eren grins, drops the cigarette and stubs it out with the toe of his boot. "No. Mikasa's outside Levi's apartment, but she made me come outside. I was getting too antsy. Would've gone outside the building to try to break in through a window, but-"

"And if you'd tried that, I would've been very upset," Arlert says, and Eren laughs, half-shrugs.

"What you don't know doesn't hurt you. Come on." He leads them to the elevators and the twelfth floor, and Erwin realizes that he's never been inside their building, that Levi's always met him outside, around the corner. Paranoia. Eren's vibrating as the elevator climbs upward, some animal caged inside his skin, the heave of his shoulders as he breathes vicious. He settles as Arlert touches his shoulder.

The doors open, and Eren leads them down more non-descript hallways to where Mikasa is leaning against the wall, so still she seems marble, a sheathed blade, waiting. She glances at them both, pushes herself off the wall.

"Armin. You have the key?"

Armin fumbles through his key ring, fishes out the one to Levi's door, and unlocks the apartment. He opens it a crack and calls through,

"Levi, I'm coming in. Do you mind if the others come in, too?"

Silence from within, and then Levi's voice, flat, resigned,

"If you must."

Armin pushes the door open, and he and Erwin step through.

Erwin pulls up short, glances around, heart twisting. The apartment is utterly empty of furniture, the walls white, the air thick with the acrid smell of cleaning fluid. The walls bear paintings, drawings: light on an eviscerated torso's ropy contents, the curve of a cuff stained with blood and skin, a torn mouth curled in a smile. Bile rises in Erwin's throat. He's constantly getting glimpses of the hell Levi lived through, peering at shards of it from angles, separated by time and distance, and just that is enough to make him tremble. How does Levi bear it, having such terrible things in his head?

The only things in the living room are two gray gun lockers, both locked. In the kitchen, half-glimpsed through the archway, there's a stove, a few pots, looking clean as the day they were bought.

It's like a mausoleum.

Armin leads the way towards the back, leaning around the doorway into the bedroom.

Erwin follows. The bedroom is laid out in the same way as a room in barracks; bed across from the door, a nightstand, a lamp, dresser at the foot of the bed. Levi's legs are poking out from behind the dresser, one charcoal-stained hand on his knees.

There's a letter on the floor in front of him, written in crabbed script, and in places the letters have gone watery with old tears.

"Hey, Levi," Armin says, gesturing for Erwin to take a seat on the bed. Armin crouches against the wall across from Levi, his voice the soothing one of someone speaking to a frightened child or wounded animal. "What happened? We haven't heard from you in a while."

Levi shifts, though Erwin can't see his face, only his clenched hand, his legs. "It's coming up on the anniversary of when we were taken."

"Must be a hard time of the year." Armin sits down, stretches out one leg to knock his foot against Levi's.

Eren and Mikasa appear at the bedroom door, hovering.

"I had a plan for how I was going to handle it. Stay inside, cook, paint or draw. Then I got the letter."

"Someone you know?"

The dull thunk of Levi knocking his head against the wall. "Yeah. Mr. Ral, Petra's father."

Armin blows out a hard breath. "Was he blaming you?"

"No. He. He believed that Petra made the choice to be in my squad, to be special ops, even though I told him, I kept telling him, that she joined because of me, because I told her she was worthy, she could change the world in spec ops, and she- she fucking believed me and she died for it. He still believes that."

"What did he want?" Eren says from the doorway, and Levi sighs.

"Hello, Eren. He wants to know-" the thud of closed fist striking flesh, "-everything. He read the autopsy, the report from my debriefing, but those were... sanitized." Levi laughs, harsh, cracked. "And I guess he isn't satisfied with knowing the outlines of what they did to her. He wants to know how they did it. What she said." A pause, filled only with the sound of his animal breathing. "Exactly how she suffered."

"That's a lot to ask of the lone survivor," Armin says in a voice struggling for neutrality. "You already went through one of the longest debriefing processes in the history of your division. You have the right to tell him no, if that's what necessary for your mental health."

Levi's hand clenches on his knee. Charcoal smears black against his jeans. His voice is a choked, horrible thing, harsh with oceans of grief.

"I will *never* tell him no. Whatever he needs from me, I'll give, because I got his daughter killed. I led her into the trap, watched as they broke her, said nothing. If her father needs to know every fucking detail of how they hurt her, how they destroyed her because of me, then I'll tell him, because I owe him that. I owe Petra that. It is. It is the least I can do."

"But will it harm you further to remember what happened in detail?" Armin says, searching for calm in the face of Levi's hurricane of grief.

Levi speaks in a poisonous dragging rattle, drawn up from the deeps of his wounded heart.

"I put my fingers inches from hers because that was close as we could get in the cell, and I told her I was holding her hand, and I told her we were warm, and outside in the sunlight, and she died. The last thing she said, the last fucking thing, was that she had been proud to be my soldier. That it had been worth it." A deep, ragged breath.

"*Nothing* will ever hurt me as much as that."

Erwin can't sit still any longer, listening to the terrible agony in Levi's voice. He shoves himself off the bed and crosses to drop to his knees beside Armin.

Levi jerks. He stares at Erwin with red-rimmed eyes, uncomprehending. A flood of fury, of grief, rising in his hoarse whisper,

"Erwin."

He reaches for him, smears charcoal across Erwin's cheek with trembling fingers, and as Erwin reaches up to capture his hand, Levi goes bone-white. His jaw clenches. He uncoils from the floor, the rage in his eyes like a storm, a hurricane contained in a form too small for it.

"Why did you call him?" His voice is hollow. Flat. All the more terrible for the way his hands curl into fists, nails splitting skin. Blood dripping.

"He's your-" Eren starts.

"Lover. Yes," Levi says, still toneless, ignoring Erwin and Armin entirely. "And now we'll all get to watch him die, because the Titans are watching me, they're watching this building, you fucking idiots, and now they'll know he's my goddamned weakness!" His voice fills the apartment, rises into a shredded howl. He steps over Armin, past Erwin, and stalks toward Eren, toward Mikasa. "You fucks, you goddamned idiots, they're going to take him, they're going to use him to get to me, and I told you not to bring him here, not to tell him-"

"Levi," Erwin starts, standing, but Levi chops at the air, and Erwin shuts up.

Levi tilts his head. Erwin can imagine his eyes: the flat darkness of them, yourself reflected, and nothing human. Soft, Levi says, "What did you think would happen? That he'd pull me out of this apartment, that we'd escape the Titans, that there was going to be a happy ever after?" He laughs, ugly, hurting. "There was never going to be a happy ever after. Not for someone like me."

That, Erwin can't abide. He pulls Levi back around by the shoulder, cups his face until Levi looks at him. "Levi, stop."

Levi's anger crumbles, the fierce set of his mouth wavering. He swallows, straightens his shoulders. "I should have told you not to come here. I should've been brave enough. But I didn't want you to know how close they are, how much danger you'd be in-"

"We'll go to the police."

Levi snorts. "They're in the police. They're in the military. They're everywhere, and you should know."

Erwin casts about for something to say, something solid, something that can ease the absolute grief in Levi's face when he looks at Erwin, like Erwin's already gone, already fading into the darkness of the cell he'll never escape.

He finds only,

"Levi, it's going to be okay, I promise. Trust me. I won't let myself be taken."

Levi looks at him, hollow-eyed. Shakes his head in quiet disbelief at Erwin's stupidity. There is such appalling resignation in his voice when he says, simple,

"They take everything."

Title from Vienna Teng's 'Never Look Away.' Comments, kudos, bookmarks, and criticism are adored. Talk to me on Bluesky [here](#) (18+ only) or check out my other social media [here](#) if you'd like.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: mentions of torture and mental illness.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"So, uh," Armin starts, staring at his papers and blushing so hard Erwin can half-feel the heat from his seat across the room, "this might be awkward, and I'm sorry, but..." he trails off.

"I'm guessing we've moved on from talking about the surgery tomorrow," Erwin says. His stomach roars, but he ignores it. He can't eat or drink for several hours before the surgery, so as to avoid aspiration pneumonia.

Armin rolls his eyes. "Obviously. But I know that Levi, Eren, and Mikasa go out to these kink clubs, and I'm guessing that's where you met them? Levi doesn't exactly have much of a social life otherwise."

"Yeah. He caught my interest, we got to talking, and now we're... whatever we are."

"Okay." Armin fiddles with his pen, then firms his jaw and says all in a rush, "So this kinky stuff - I'm really really trying not to shame you or make you feel bad or whatever - but you're not hurting each other?"

He's pretty adorable flustered. Erwin rubs his hand over his hair and sighs, mostly because it can get pretty tiring explaining himself over and over again, but on the other hand it's good to know that Levi has others who care for him.

"Emotional hurt, no. As for physical pain, I hurt him in very specific ways that he's requested, and he always has the option to say stop when or if it becomes too much."

"But you're not taking his money, or making him wear what you want, or telling him who he can talk to, or all that?"

Erwin blinks. "No. We're not in a twenty-four-seven dynamic, or a total power exchange."

Armin gnaws on his lower lip. "Would you want to be?"

"God, no." Erwin has to laugh. "That whole 24/7, TPE thing... it's a nice fantasy, but it's too dicey for me. Too much responsibility. Also," he sobers up, since this is serious stuff they're talking about, "With TPE, it's just easier, in my opinion, to slide into questionable territory if you don't have clearly defined avenues of communication, or periods set aside where the partners aren't in role."

"Especially when you get into the really difficult stuff like the top controlling the bottom's social life and family contacts or taking control of their money. Sure, there should be contracts involved, but those contracts don't hold up in courts of law, and if someone outside the relationship were to become concerned about the potential for abuse, those contracts won't mean much."

"You've thought a lot about this," Armin says.

Erwin shrugs. "I've ended up as a sort of mentor for people entering the scene, and a lot of newbies come in thinking that they want a TPE 24/7 relationship. They don't really think about the fact that the dishes still have to get done, someone has to walk the dog, the bills still have to get paid... The realities of daily life don't meld very well with the fantasy of TPE. TPE can work for some people, but I think those people are a very small minority in the kink scene, and they have to be even more skilled at communication and defining boundaries than regular kink practitioners."

"Okay. That makes me feel better." Armin grins, relieved, and swallows. "So, if you and Levi come over for dinner sometime, you're not going to make him kneel or something?"

"What."

"Oh, it's just that I've seen some .gifs of this woman making this two guys dressed like ponies haul her down the street in front of people, and..." Armin descends into vague mumbling, sinking so low in his chair that he seems to have lost his spine entirely.

Erwin wishes for two hands, so he could put his head in both of them.

"That's not going to happen, ever. The people that walk around in public with other people on leashes or in full fetish gear, those people are roping unconsenting people into their own exhibitionism, and that just makes the rest of us look bad. If you're in a venue that's adults-only and known to be kinky, or you're at a pride parade or something where it's known that exhibitionism is a part, then I'm not so annoyed, but yeah, going down a city street in full-on pony gear in front of families is wrong."

"Oh. Okay. Good, we're on the same page, then," Armin says, and then thankfully, at last, they talk about his plans for recovery instead.

-

The alarm goes off far too early at 3 AM.

Erwin flails for the off button, hits it at last, and then winces as hunger twists his stomach into cramps.

He's never having surgery again, if he has to fast so much. Though, to be fair, probably only twenty percent of his indigestion is from fasting. The rest is pure nervousness, because this is a major surgery; it's six to seven hours, depending on how difficult the process of anchoring the socket to his scapula and collarbone is, and he's expected to spend several weeks in recovery eating awful hospital food and doing physical and occupational therapy.

Levi's said he's going to visit nearly every day, though, so they'll have some time to themselves. He's even offered to read 'shit-ass Tom Clancy' to Erwin, though Erwin's dubious about Levi's ability to read aloud without being snide about Erwin's taste. Levi's not the sort to take pity on people, even after major surgery, which is wonderful. A man could choke on pity.

Surgery. Right.

He stumbles to the bathroom, takes care of his morning ablutions, gets dressed in old, comfortable clothing, and heads for the front door. His hospital bag, packed with computer, clothing, pills, and other sundries, is by the door. The damn thing seems to have gained fifty pounds overnight.

His phone vibrates in his pocket: once, then twice. Two texts? He's supposed to just get one from the cab company to let him know his ride's here-

Oh.

He leaves the house, but doesn't really pay attention to the process of locking it, too fixated on the video from Levi: Levi, frowning into his phone's camera, before Erwin hits the play button. Erwin heads down the front sidewalk, enraptured by his phone.

"Happy surgery day," Levi says, his tone and expression funereal. "I suppose next time I see you you'll have some bullshit Terminator arm that you'll probably have to buy expensive batteries and shit for, but it'll make you happy, so. Armin said you probably won't be allowed to do much for a while, so you'll get to suffer through my cooking, because no way in hell am I letting you cook with a Terminator arm you don't know how to use."

Levi shifts, rubs at his eyes. "I got your text about meeting you in the recovery room along with your family, so that's going to be hellishly fun, dealing with you while you're high and your rich-ass family stares." He's blinking, hard, quick, swallowing. His voice cracks. "But I'll be there. I promise. I'll be there when you wake up."

Erwin's grinning like an idiot, heart twisted in his chest, when he looks up from his phone towards the open taxi doors. The driver - a sandy-haired, stout man- is standing by the back door, holding it open, smiling-

Wait.

Someone's in the driver's seat. The shadow of a hand, moving in the dim green glow of the internal lights.

"Why two staff?"

"Standard procedure when making a hospital run, in case you have a lot of baggage for an extended stay," the man by the door says. His smile has too many teeth.

The cool night air crackles electric against Erwin's skin. "I see. Just give me a second to text someone."

"We need to get going, you can do it in the car," says the man. His gaze flickers to the other person inside the car, who's turned to look at them both: nondescript, dark hair-

Their eyes swallow all the light in the world.

"Just one second," Erwin says, backing away, starting to key in the warning code Eren gave him so long ago. He can't run far, can't fight back, not with one arm and twenty-four hours with no food, and his neighbors are all asleep-

The Titan by the door lunges, too fast for such a stout man, all teeth in the moonlight, and Erwin jerks back, just manages to avoid the hit, just enough time to get the phone up to his face and shout,

"Titans, help!"

The phone vibrates, but he can't see whether the message got through, is too busy dropping the bag and running. If he could get in the house, but it would take too long, would leave him cornered on the front stoop-

He plows into the next-door neighbor's box hedge, shoves through, and keeps going, stumbling over garden hoses, a sandbox.

Another shadow strolls into view in front of the fence leading out of this yard. A woman, with the same empty eyes, a wide and vicious grin, a button-up shirt gaping to show the upper half of a gorilla's head tattooed across her chest.

"Morning," says the Ape in a low awful rasp.

Erwin throws himself to the side, into the side-yard, but he's wasted too much time staring at the Ape, too much-

Something slams into the back of his skull, explodes red and white across the inside of his eyelids. He bites through his lower lip. Blood fills his mouth with sickening iron. His thoughts crash together and spiral into nothing, and he sinks into the morass of oblivion.

-

Levi knows the moment the phone rings.

It crawls into him with a sick solidity, this knowing. Carves itself a home where his heart should be, clots his blood with grief.

The Titans have Erwin.

He is frozen for what feels like forever, staring at his phone, at the bright red screen, the message.

Banging on the door.

Voices.

The Titans have Erwin, and in some morbid way he's glad it's them. He doesn't have to hope for Erwin to be returned to him undamaged. He has bitter certainty instead.

"-evi-"

He lifts his gaze from the screen to Mikasa and Eren and Armin, clustered around his bedside. Faces pale in the moonlight. Armin's hand outstretched, hovering, afraid to touch. One of the men's shirts slides off Mikasa's thin shoulders, exposes a collarbone knotted with old scars.

"They have him."

The words break a levee within him.

"I knew it, I knew it, I always fucking knew-" the old darkness rising, the fury beaten into him that now stares out through his eyes, the engine that made him the thing the Titans feared-

He will tear down this building brick by brick. He will find the Titans and make the rivers run black with their blood. He will burn everything and keep only the people he loves alive in the ashes.

"-isten to Armin, damn it, he's the one with the PhD and years of experience!"

Levi stutters back to himself. His jaw aches from where he's clenched it, thick pain winding up into his skull, and all he can see is Armin's eyes, Armin sitting on the bed beside him. His voice, calling Levi back.

"Sorry," he says, and Armin sits back. Eren and Mikasa, arguing by the window, whip back around to stare at them. Mikasa springs across the room in that terrible way she has, silent and so quick she seems a shadow, and cuffs her hand in Levi's hair, shakes him.

"Don't scare us like that ever again."

"Well, I'll try, if my various mental illnesses don't make that impossible," Levi snips.

Mikasa lets go of him and steps back. "They took him outside his house." She holds her phone up to display the GPS coordinates. "And they were smart enough to find his phone and throw it out before they took him somewhere."

"Some of them are very clever," Levi manages, before his vision swims and he has to duck down to hang his head between his knees, his stomach writhing in revulsion, mouth watering with the need to vomit. Cold sweat beads his forehead.

Armin rubs his back, gentle, and Levi soaks the kindness in. Before Erwin, these three had been his only source of gentleness.

"We're going to call the police," Armin says.

Levi swallows until he feels steadier, then lifts his head. "No. You can't. They're in the police, they'll know-"

The three of them glance at each other, and Levi knows with a sudden chill prickle what they'll say.

"You don't know that with a certainty," Armin says with the same gentleness, the kindness that's now a blade. "It's far more likely that these are your delusions talking."

Levi ducks his head, shoves the heels of his hands into his eyes until the pain overwhelms the betrayed roar in his head. Armin's right, intellectually he knows that, he knows he's not well and his illness makes him this paranoid, but-

"I feel like I know it," he whispers, hating the quiver in his voice, the weakness there. "It's right there, it's true."

Armin's hand, cold on his neck. Mikasa's on his elbow. Eren's on his knee.

"You are not your illness," Armin says. "I know how much I'm asking, I do - asking you to believe your friends' words over your own mind, what is absolutely real to you in this moment. But I have to ask this. We'll never be able to find him on our own, and every minute we don't let the police know about this is a minute we're losing. Even if there are Titans in the police, what difference does it make? Either way the Titans know people will be looking for him. We've got nothing to lose, so please trust us."

They ask so much.

This has been Levi's objective reality since the day they were taken: that Titans are everywhere, that Titans will take whatever they can from him, that he can trust only a few. The Titans have taken one of his most precious things, and Armin wants him to lay Erwin's safety in the hands of the same police who betrayed him.

But these are the people who brought him forth from the tomb the Titans made for him, carried him past the rotting corpses of his team without even a flinch. Stayed beside him in the hospital when they found out that he had no family to wait for him. Opened their arms and their hearts and their home to him, damaged and struggling as he is.

He can't speak. Can't find the strength to do so when the fear is roaring in his head.

He nods, and it feels like absolute betrayal.

Their hands tighten.

"Thank you," Armin breathes, and then he's up, walking into the living room to call the police.

Levi hangs onto reality by the skin of his teeth, Eren and Mikasa's warm bodies to either side of him his only harbor.

He's killed Erwin, betrayed him into the hands of the Titans. He will never escape this fact. It will slink after him through every empty night, curl about him when he wakes to yet another morning without Erwin.

Mornings and mornings and yet more mornings, tens of thousands of them, every dawn a herald of the life he must live without the man he stupidly loved.

He can't even cry. The grief is too massive, too cold, takes all his energy just to grapple with.

He closes his eyes.

Breathes into the emptiness.

Ten thousand mornings, and with every one he'll say,

God, I'm so sorry.

-

Time has no meaning to Erwin anymore, except in that there are brief moments without pain.

It's its own form of torture, knowing that he doesn't have to be in pain, longing for those spaces where he can gasp and shake and weep with the joy of feeling something other than bright agony.

Erwin's told them everything, of course. Everything he knows about Levi. Everything he knows about the Titans. Made up a hundred stories in the frantic search for something, anything, he can trade for a moment of peace.

When they throw him back into his filthy cell, he huddles in a corner. Focuses everything he is on one implacable fact:

Levi survived this.

It has to be enough.

-

The search grinds on.

Levi eats and drinks and sleeps because he knows Erwin would want him to, but he takes no joy in it.

He's gone through several hours of interviews with the police, though that's nothing compared to poor Eren, whose association with his father's group has come back to bite him in the ass once more. Like it's not enough the kid can't be a cop the way he wanted and had to settle for paralegal work, now he's got the cops eyeing him as a suspect (until Levi shut that whole avenue of inquiry down).

The police keep saying they'll call them when they find anything, but with every update the hope in their voices dwindles.

"It's like they fucking disappeared off the face of the planet," Eren says one night over shitty Chinese take-out.

Mikasa, tucked into one end of the couch, stirs her dan dan noodles with her chopsticks. "I'm almost positive they're in a house somewhere. They're clever, they know law enforcement can't get in without a warrant, and as long as they keep the soundproofing in good shape and burn anything bloody or incriminating, they can keep Erwin there until he dies."

Levi stares into his egg drop soup. "I asked the police to look into whether anyone had made any large purchases of lime or other industrial chemicals lately, but they brushed me off." The half-cooked eggs swirl inside the container like clouds, the sort he'd see when the Titans pushed him to the edge. "Like I had no experience with what Titans are or how they operate. I'm not Titan intelligence like Erwin was, but-"

Titan intelligence.

"Levi?"

He jerks a hand up to shut whoever spoke up, attention focused inside himself, struggling to remember...

Levi lunges for his phone, knocks over the containers of rice - Eren groans and gets up to clean - and scrolls through his recent contacts, praying that it hasn't gotten automatically deleted.

The night he met Erwin.

Hanji's number.

"Erwin's friend, he said she has informants in the Titans, she's still in touch, maybe she can help," Levi manages, heart hammering as he stabs at the redial button with shaking fingers.

God, fuck, please let this work.

One ring. Two. Three. Fou-

"Hello?"

He's gripping the phone so tightly it's cutting his fingers.

"Hanji? It's Levi."

"Oh, Levi, hey, what's-"

"The Titans have Erwin," he blurts, the words now easier to say but never losing any of their terror. "And the police aren't helping, and Erwin said you were in Titan intel together, so-"

"Shit," Hanji mutters. "At least all his intel's out of date, they won't get much. I can help. This isn't my secure line, so let's keep this short and sweet. Be at 222 Andrews St. in half an hour, underneath the streetlight. I'll meet you there."

"Got it."

Levi ends the call and glances up at the others. "I've got to meet her in half an hour; can you drop me off at 222 Andrews?"

"Fuck no, we're not dropping you off anywhere," Eren says around a mouthful of potsticker. "They've got Erwin, you think they're not keeping an eye on you? Besides, what the hell, man, you're the paranoid one!"

Thanks, Eren. The vote of confidence is so empowering.

Levi gets up and pulls on his ratty leather jacket, because whether they'll take him or not, he's going to meet Hanji. "If it's for Erwin, then paranoia doesn't matter. Besides, I'm not saying actually leave me there, just go around the corner and keep an eye out until I get picked up."

"That, we can do." Mikasa snags her car keys off the coffee table and heads for the door, Eren following in her wake and eating his potstickers like he'll never see them again.

-

222 Andrews turns out to be a nondescript one-story office building on the edge of the industrial district, surrounded by chain-link fence and gravel.

Levi's slouched against the streetlight, every nerve humming with potential threat, his gun in a shoulder holster. He hasn't had to fire it since he got discharged, but he keeps it clean, well-oiled, ready.

He turns at the crunch of gravel.

Hanji's crossing the yard towards him, keys in one hand, Walther pistol in the other.

"Hey," she says, undoing the padlock on the gate. It's strange to see her so subdued, wrapped in a thick sweater and jeans. "Come on in, and you can wave off your friends. Jaeger and Ackerman, I'm guessing?"

"Correct." Levi does just that and follows her inside. It's run-down inside - all peeling white paint, plywood in the windows, old linoleum - and he stops short at the mattress shoved into one corner. "This is where you live?"

Hanji's fiddling with a coffee maker in the makeshift kitchen, lit only by the fluorescent light above. "Yup. Technically illegal, since the building's not zoned for it, but it's an obscure location, has enough space around it that I can see threats a mile off, and no one bothers me since I've updated all the information about this building online to read 'owned but vacant.' And considering that I'm in contact with Titans, obscurity's pretty important."

"Your contacts, do they have anything?" Levi takes the cup of coffee she hands him, but can't tear his attention away from Hanji's face long enough to drink. Desperate hope unfolds its razor wings inside him.

"I've left messages. I have four contacts, they're usually pretty quick at getting back to me. Shouldn't be more than an hour. Come on." She leads him down another hallway past rooms full of filing cabinets and shoves open a door.

Levi halts in the doorway, breath sticking in his throat.

The room is a shrine. A desk is shoved into a corner, cups of old coffee covering every inch but for those occupied by a laptop. One wall's taken up by a map of the country, and hundreds of pins with colored heads mark the spots of Titan attacks, each pin bearing a small tag: a number. The other three walls have photos, hundreds of them, with names and dates scrawled on them in black Sharpie.

"Luckily," Hanji says, watching him through the steam of her coffee, "I only have enough room for the most recent five hundred victims. In this room, at least. I haven't started covering the other walls, but when I do," she smiles, "we'll know I've finally cracked."

"I'm thinking you already have."

Hanji laughs, the sound high and sick and more like a wail than anything joyful. "Yeah, you and the psych department at intel." Her smile is a sad thing, a baring of teeth. "They let me go a month ago, thought I was too deep into the Titans, too devoted to the work."

"Wouldn't let me come back either," Levi says. "Same old story, blah blah can't have you motivated by vengeance, concerns about your stability and so on. But hey, at least we got honorable discharges and pensions out of the deal." They grin at each other, sharing the same bitter cup.

"That's the thing about Titans," Hanji says, sipping her coffee, her glasses reflecting the terrible wall of names and dates and faces. "Once they get in you, they never leave. It's an obsession, a... *compulsion*, and it never lets you go. I still keep thinking that if I just look harder, if I find the one thing, I can stop the Titans."

"We all thought that." His words are tired with old grief.

Hanji nods, then falls into her computer chair, somehow without spilling a drop of coffee. "Give me the details; where he got taken, what time, anything unusual about the day before?"

Levi sits down on the - *disgusting, filthy* - floor, since there's nowhere else to sit, and gives her everything he can remember.

Hanji types it into her laptop and sets it to run some algorithm; she tries to explain it but Levi's never had a head for intel besides stake-outs and covert operations. A progress bar pops up and she spins her chair around to face Levi where he's leaning against the wall.

"What will you do, when you find them?"

The certainty that he will find the Titans, that she can help him do so, is absurdly, stupidly comforting.

Levi stares into his coffee. The liquid ripples against the sides from his shaking hands. "Kill them." He can see it now, his gun rising to meet the Titan's chests, their skulls, the bullet thudding into its home inside their brains.

"A little extrajudicial execution, great," Hanji says. "The police will be happy with that, I'm sure, and Erwin will just love watching you get marched off to prison."

"They're hurting Erwin. He would never be in this situation if it wasn't for me, and I know exactly how much they can hurt him, what they can do-"

Hanji's chair screeches on the linoleum as she shoves herself towards him, the sound making Levi look up at her, her expression grave in the dim light. Her voice is stone, implacable.

"Erwin told me the Titans wanted you. He knew that, and he made the choice to love you despite it. He made that decision without regret, and without hesitation, because you were - you are - worth it."

Levi swallows. His eyes itch hot with tears he refuses to let fall.

"But-"

Hanji's eyes are bright behind her glasses, red-rimmed, her voice wavering, and at her grief Levi's own rises, swells, lodges in his throat. "Levi, please. Leave him the dignity of his choice."

And that's it, all laid out in simple words: that Erwin chose this, knowing the danger. Chose him.

To say otherwise would be to mock Erwin, his will, his power, his love for Levi.

"All right," Levi manages, and Hanji favors him with a watery smile.

A steel box on the floor by Hanji's feet starts ringing.

Levi raises a brow as Hanji lunges for the box, juggling her coffee in the other hand, and swipes her thumbprint across a sensor.

"Ah, fuck, goddamnit, I need a better set-up," Hanji mutters as she wrenches the box open and yanks out a phone: nondescript but for the long steel cable anchoring it to the box. "Hanji, code 112985. Designation?"

Must be the contact. The one chance Levi has to get Erwin out alive. Levi rises onto his knees, coffee forgotten, every bit of him focused on the phone in Hanji's hand.

"Yeah, got that; my program says it's probably a smaller cell, based in the western part of the city. You know one?" Hanji's typing something. "Colossus and Crystal corroborate? Wait,

wait - okay, probability of one of the cell being a homeowner is eighty-five percent or more, if that helps. Anything from Jotun?"

Levi's heart is thundering, drowning out everything but Hanji's voice, droning on and on about proof and codes and god damn it just tell him, tell him where to go, what to do-

"Confirmed. Thanks. I'll let them know."

Hanji turns to him. "I have three locations; probability of the cell being at one of those three is, eh, about eighty percent. Enough to be going on with. But Levi-"

Levi's already up, heading for the door, pauses at Hanji's voice. Turns. Her face is drawn.

"My sources say this wasn't a random attack dreamed up by this cell. This has been in the works a while." Hanji licks her lips, laces her fingers together in her lap. "The Ape ordered this. The Ape might still be there."

Levi struggles not to laugh, because of course, of fucking course the Ape is there, the Ape haunts him again. "Great. Wonderful." Three locations, sourced from Titans, given by someone drummed out of Titan intel for being too invested-

"If we go location by location, the Titans'll get tipped off, they'll run." Hope, dwindling. The grip of his Beretta is practically burned into his palm.

Hanji swallows, pushes her hands through her hair. "You were Spec Op's finest, you don't have any pull left?"

Goddamnit, it hasn't been that long since his discharge, but the other Spec Ops teams were wary of him after his recovery, never spoke to him. "Not enough to cover all three locations. Do you know anyone in the police that might believe us?"

Hanji shrugs. "I've got contacts there, I'll see what I can do. Here's the addresses."

Levi leaves her to it, goes out into the hallway to call Eren.

"Any news?" Eren's voice has gone hoarse, humming with fury.

"We've got it narrowed down to three locations. Hanji says the Ape is likely involved, might still be there."

"Fuck-" the slam of Eren's fist into a car door, and Mikasa groaning in annoyance.

"I've got the addresses, Hanji's calling the cops to see if we can get them involved, but I don't know how much pull she's got. What do you two think?"

"This is my phone, Mikasa-" a scuffle, and then Mikasa's voice.

"We need to hit all three at once, quick, quiet. I can call Henning and Lynne to cover one location, we can take another, but-"

"And then we will all go to jail because of vigilantism, I learned this in my first criminal justice class-" Eren interjects.

"Goddamnit, Eren, Hanji already ranted about that, I'm not going to kill them unless they force me to."

A pause. "You're not?"

Levi takes a deep breath. "I've seen... too much death already, and I'm so tired of it."

Erwin believed he could rise above his past, his anger, his instinctual lashing out. Had forgiven him every moment, and though Erwin would forgive him this, Levi wants to prove he can control himself, even in this last extremity.

Wants to be worthy of Erwin's belief, because even if he's come too late to save Erwin, he will keep that night in the room in the club, those words, branded on his heart:

There will always be enough of you left for me.

"Okay," Mikasa says.

The sound of Hanji's chair moving makes him turn to find Hanji in the doorway, her phone in her hand.

"I've got in touch with my contacts in the police and given them the addresses. We move in fifteen minutes."

"Eren, Mikasa?"

"We heard. Which address are we assigned to?"

Hanji hands him the slip of paper, and he repeats it to Eren and Mikasa, vision swimming, hands shaking, every bit of him straining towards Erwin.

"I'll let Reiner know to expect us," Hanji says, leading him out of the building. "Bertholdt and Annie are handling the other locations."

The names are familiar, but he doesn't have time to remember. He checks his gun and follows Hanji out into the dark, to where Eren and Mikasa are waiting-

To Erwin.

-

Erwin slips up from bleary sleep, the sort that brings no relief from agony. His arm's wrenched up behind him, and they leave his legs stretched straight and cuffed to the floor so he can't stand to relieve the pressure, the tension slowly shredding the inside of his shoulder to ribbons. The rope the Titans use has abraded the thin skin of his wrist until blood drips, crusts his arm, trickles down his side in a maddening trail that he can't do anything about.

A dull ache spreads from where the Ape's kneed him in the ribs a few times, her eyes going wide with glee when the sharp crunch of some of them breaking had made him jerk and groan.

He doesn't know how long he's been in this empty bedroom, with its bloodstained carpet and peeling wallpaper. The windows of this nondescript suburban house are covered with thick curtains, and they don't seem to have a set schedule as to when they haul him out of this room and force him into the white-tiled bathroom where the Ape is waiting.

He works up some saliva and licks his lips, though it makes them crack and bleed. The relief from the dryness is worth it.

Such simple pleasures.

A laugh wracks him, makes him curl around the pain of his ribs, wrenches his shoulder into an explosive agony.

He'd always wondered, watching Levi, how Levi had survived this. How anyone could. Now he knows. The drive to live is a terrible thing, a terrible law that forces his heart to beat, his lungs to draw breath, and no matter how he's hoped and tried and begged, he can't force himself to die. To escape.

Levi.

Oh, God, poor Levi. He's tried so hard to break free of his past, of the violence he's known for so long, and Erwin wants, so badly, to believe that he's still free of it, that his rage at Erwin's loss won't drive him back into that prison.

He shifts, still unable to give up the vain hope that somehow he can ease the pain in his shoulder, then stills.

Noise from outside. The thunder of feet, someone new barking commands - get down on the ground, hands over your head- and oh, God, hope rises, glows inside him. He pulls at the cuffs binding his legs to the floor, but there's no give, just the sharp edge of metal digging in.

Hurried footsteps.

The door slams inward and leaves a crater in the wall where the knob hit. Light spills inward and burns with radiance, and cut out in darkness, silhouetted:

Levi, blood and dust streaked across his face, his eyes wild and terrible, chest heaving. His hands shake, rattling the keys in one of them. He looks at Erwin like a man who's found the most precious thing on Earth.

He's beautiful, still a gift, still everything that Erwin's ever dreamed of.

Erwin smiles, and it hurts, and he's laughing and crying at once, because Levi is here, he's free, and there's a world waiting for them both.

Levi throws himself across the room with a great wrenching moan, flings himself at Erwin's feet and scrabbles at the cuffs, hands shaking too much to undo them.

"Levi," Erwin manages, and at his name Levi's hands steady, and he wrenches the cuffs open, stands, saws through the rope with a pocketknife.

It's the sweetest feeling Erwin's ever known to just let his arm fall, a pain so keen it's bliss. He groans, can't help it, and Levi takes his hand, starts to rub the feeling back into it. Stares at Erwin like he can't believe he's here, that the moment is real.

"Erwin, I'm so sorry, I'm such a fuck-up-"

Erwin shakes his head, winces as the motion jars his shoulder, but keeps it together enough to whisper, "You were always worth this."

Levi's grin is a watery, frail thing. "Because you chose me, huh?"

"Yeah." Erwin closes his eyes for a moment, takes a second to thank whatever's out there that Levi is here beside him, that they have each other, still. "Did you kill them?"

"No." Levi lets go of his hand and begins massaging his forearm, the cramped muscles there.

Erwin opens his eyes to find Levi looking at him. There are entire worlds in his gaze.

"I would have. I wanted to- I wanted to do to them what they did to me, to you. I wanted to burn them to nothing, tear them apart, but-" his hands at Erwin's throat, feeling his heartbeat, "-I couldn't, I couldn't be that person again, not when you believed I could be different. Even if they deserved it."

There's people moving in the hallway, someone calling for paramedics, but Erwin only has eyes for Levi, for the unneeded fear in Levi's face as he says,

"I'm sorry."

Erwin's heart brims and spills into the tears trailing warm down his cheeks, because Levi had believed him, had wanted to make him proud, even in those terrible moments, in that last agony. He leans his forehead against Levi's, the warmth of Levi's skin a gift. He forces his arm up until at last shaking numb fingers tangle in Levi's hair. A terrible sound rips out of him, because now he knows, now he bears the same scars as Levi, the same aching realization that he can be made to break.

But it's okay, it's all okay, he can see the future now, the life he thought he'd lost, a life full of love and pain and wonder with Levi at his side.

"Nothing to be sorry for, my good, good boy," he whispers, and Levi clutches at him, Levi's eyes twin lamps in the darkness, and his hands strong and sure where they cradle Erwin's face. Levi's voice cracks, breaks.

"It's okay, Erwin. We're okay, I've got you, I've got you-" his heartbeat against Erwin's chest, his mouth an inch from Erwin's, breath clouding between them in a feathery kiss against

Erwin's lips.

"I've got you."

His lips on Erwin's now, and they taste of salt, tears of grief and joy, of hope at last reclaimed.

"We survived."

Chapter End Notes

Title from Vienna Teng's 'Never Look Away.' Comments, kudos, bookmarks, and criticism are adored. Talk to me on Bluesky [here](#) (18+ only) or check out my other social media [here](#) if you'd like.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Have you seen him?" Hanji bursts into the waiting room in a whirlwind of energy, juggling phone and coffee and messenger bag.

Levi slouches further down into the painful chair. "No. He's in surgery; when they broke his ribs one of the shards ended up close to his heart, and they've gone in to get it out. Prognosis is good, though." At least they have a private waiting room to quietly go mad in; anything involving Titans is impressive enough to warrant one.

"Where're your friends?" Hanji asks as she busies herself with pulling out a laptop.

"Gone home to get some sleep." They'd pushed him to do the same, but Levi can't leave: not when he knows the pain of waking up to an empty hospital room. Still, he wishes he could sleep; his eyes sting, eyelids leaden.

Hanji nods, attention now on the cup of coffee in her hands.

Levi can't begrudge her; for hospital coffee, it isn't bad, and after the night they've all had, it's a necessity. He can't drink any more, though; already half-feels like vibrating right out of his own skin with nerves.

He can still feel Erwin on his hands: the rasp of blood and grit in Erwin's hair, the terrible cold of his skin, his heartbeat against Levi's palms. Whenever his eyes close, when he loses the battle against exhaustion, he sees that tiny room, the filthy carpet, the rope hanging from the ceiling and stained with blood, and Erwin, bruised and bloody and still so beautiful. The stench of that house has crawled inside his nose and he can't get it out.

Someone raps at the door and startles him out of the doze. It's a tall man in police uniform, muscular, undone bulletproof vest hanging off his shoulders. He surveys the room, rakes a hand over his short blond hair, and grins at Hanji.

"Got some good news," the man says, and Hanji bounces up from her seat, grabs him, and shoves him into a seat with no little amount of force.

"Yes, yes, tell, tell, tell," Hanji chants, maniacal, standing over him and practically quivering with anticipation.

"We've got the Ape," says the man, and Hanji makes a noise so high-pitched Levi's ears are probably bleeding.

The man winces.

"That's wonderful, Reiner! Is she at Central already?"

They keep talking, but Levi doesn't have time for their conversation. All his attention is fixed on Reiner's nameplate.

Braun.

The name's familiar, he can remember Petra saying it in connection with something, Titans probably, but was it as a contact, a victim?

He drags his gaze up from the nameplate to examine Reiner's face: familiar, again. He can just see it, grainy CC-TV footage, him and his team gathered around the monitor to watch it, and something about the way this man carries himself, like he's afraid to break something...

He was right all along, every second: the Titans are in the police. They've followed him, and he doesn't have his gun, had to turn it at the front desk, and there's nothing in this room to attack with, and the Titan is armed and armored. He can't attack like this, not when the Titan is a cop, when there's closed-circuit cameras watching them all.

And Hanji is chatting away to him like it's no big deal.

"Hanji," Levi says, and something in his voice makes them both turn.

The Titan's eyes are horribly human.

"Hanji, I need to talk to you for a moment. Alone."

"Back in a moment," Hanji says to the Titan, and gets up, following Levi out into the hallway and then into the family bathroom. It's a small room, white tiled, and Levi's words resound off the walls as he wheels on Hanji, snarling,

"You brought a fucking Titan into the hospital, this is the man you called earlier - that's the Armor, he blew up a fucking bank, and you've handed Erwin over to him on a silver platter."

"Levi," she steps forward, hands in the air, and Levi recoils, hands itching, ready to lunge.

"He's one of my contacts," she says, conciliatory, quiet. "We've been working together for three years now, me and him and his partners."

"He's a Titan in the goddamn police department, Hanji, how much information has he fed them? How many people has he killed?"

Hanji rakes a hand through her hair and groans, collapsing onto the toilet seat. "He's killed, yes, and told them information." She looks up, and her eyes burn. "But he's saved far more lives than he's taken."

"Really. How comforting." Levi turns away, hands shaking, head throbbing white-hot.

Hanji snorts, the disdain in her voice making him whip back around. Her eyes pin him in place when she says, "Twenty to twenty-five percent of the missions you and your squad went on, all those lives you saved - those were based on intel from Reiner and his partners."

Hanji's voice is poison. "So imagine every life you saved, every person that I didn't have to put on my wall - a quarter of those were because of Reiner and his partners, because they were willing to walk back into the crucible every goddamn day, to put themselves at risk, knowing exactly what the Titans do to those that betray them." She rises, steps forward into Levi's space, and jabs her finger into his sternum.

"And if that's not fucking enough, just remember this - they gave you back Erwin."

Her words ring off the walls, echo in Levi's ears.

He works his jaw, bites down the self-recrimination. It's easier to stare at the floor, past Hanji's hand, than to look her in the face. Anger fades down into the simmering of a banked fire, embers waiting to catch alight.

"All right," he says, teeth aching, the words bitter. "All right. You've made your point."

It doesn't work, doesn't mesh with all he knows of the world, all he's seen of the Titans, but Hanji doesn't lie. Titans have brought Erwin back to him, and he can't change that.

He glances up at her. "But I will never trust them."

"You don't have to trust them," she says, stepping back. Her hand falls. "Just promise me one thing."

Of course. Promises and yet more promises, contracts binding him deeper into other people's lives.

"What?"

"Promise me you won't tell. Promise me you won't make their sacrifices worthless. If you reveal them, it'll jeopardize my intelligence, their lives, the lives of everyone we're working to save."

Levi takes a deep breath. "That, I can promise."

"Good." Hanji heads toward the bathroom door and into the hallway, and Levi, after splashing some cold water on his face in a vain attempt to wake himself up, follows.

They're met at the door to the waiting room by a harried-looking nurse.

"We've moved him from recovery," says the nurse, and Levi barely manages a goodbye to Hanji before he's following the nurse down innumerable hallways to a room, still and empty but for the man, the unmoving, pale, so terribly small man in the bed. The nurse guides him to a chair, and he falls into it, hardly notices the nurse leaving.

He waits. Nurses come and go, bring him coffee, bad pastries, touch his shoulder to reassure him. He musters thank yous, but his attention is on Erwin's face: pale, calm, slack with sleep, deep lavender hollows beneath his eyes, his lips cracked. His hair spreading gold against the pristine fabric of the pillow, the steady rise and fall of his chest, each breath a blessing, a

battle won in the war against the undertow of sickness and frailty and death. He holds Erwin's hand, cold, unmoving.

Time rolls on, and he subsides into the long counting: EKG beeps, the drip of IVs, the rate of Erwin's breath. Numbers swarm in his head, and he can't get them out - doesn't want them out, because these numbers may be all he will get to keep of Erwin.

At last, Erwin's fingers twitch in his, and Levi jerks awake, spine crying out from the twisted position he's dozed in, to clutch Erwin's hand in both of his, capture the minute rolls and swells of muscle in his skin.

Erwin groans deep in his throat and shifts, fingers curling.

His eyes open, and Levi had never thought to see that shade of blue again. Erwin blinks, swallows, turns to Levi, wonder dawning in his eyes, the beginning of a smile curling his mouth.

"Levi," he says, low and raw, and Levi, damn him, can't keep back the stupid smile any longer, the veil of tears in his eyes.

"I told you," Levi manages, words scraping past the clot in his throat, "I told you I'd be here when you woke up."

Erwin smiles, and it's tired and beaten and still everything Levi wants, everything he's ever wanted. He pulls Levi's hand to his mouth and - oh, fuck - kisses each one of Levi's bandaged knuckles, heedless of the scabs and dirt beneath the bandages, and that's it, that's fucking it, Levi can't be strong anymore, not like this.

It's hard to breathe, the grief and the relief is so terrible, and it's all he can do to force out between jerking breaths,

"I promised. I kept it, I'm here, I promised-"

Erwin summons up some inner strength and pulls him out of the chair, onto the bed, dirt falling from Levi's jacket, smearing on the sheets, but neither of them care-

Erwin pulls Levi into his side, gets his arm about Levi's shoulders. Presses his lips into Levi's hair, on his forehead, his nose, his mouth, forcing warmth and life and love into the cold spaces inside Levi.

"Thank you," he says between kisses, breaths, as Levi shakes, tries to push in closer but can't figure out how not to hurt him, where to touch -

At last Erwin gets one leg over Levi's shins, tangles his fingers in Levi's hair, holds him still in his warm strong hand, heedless of the IV lines. The warmth of him, the pressure, is a relief, a confirmation, and Levi - for the first time in so damn long, in days, weeks, months - relaxes.

Sinks.

Tears trickle back from his eyes into his hairline, wet the pillows. They're meaningless beside Erwin's living face, his breath against Levi's hair, his smile pressed into Levi's neck.

"I promised," is all Levi can say. For once, he kept it. For once, he saved someone.

"I trusted you," Erwin says against his skin. "I knew you would."

Levi turns into his side and curls against him, gingerly rests his head on Erwin's shoulder. The tight bar of Erwin's arm about his back is a restraint he's longed for. He glances up at Erwin to find him looking back, expression soft, amazed, broken in its tenderness.

"You look terrible," Erwin says at last, and Levi coughs out a laugh, because he hasn't slept, really slept in days, and of course he does.

"You know how to seduce a man," he says, and Erwin grins, goofy and wide and fuck, he loves him.

"You can sleep now," Erwin says into the stillness of the room, dragging his hand up Levi's spine to curl about the back of his neck, a collar and a shield. "I'm here."

Levi presses his ear to Erwin's chest and relaxes, bit by bit. Muscle by muscle. Lets the trembling and terror slip from him, pushes out into the current of sleep guided by Erwin's breathing, Erwin's heartbeat.

Erwin, still alive.

-

Levi's phone goes off near the fucking crack of dawn, vibrating across the bedside table and only stopping when he slaps his hand down on top of it.

The fuck is important enough to email him about now?

The sender - the public prosecutor - is enough to jerk him awake and start elbowing the stupid lump next to him with his head beneath the pillows.

"Erwin. Erwin! Goddamnit, get up or I'm throwing your prosthesis out the window." Not that he could, it's anchored to Erwin's scapula and collarbone, but he likes the threat.

Erwin rolls over onto his back and groans, grabbing at the pillow with his flesh hand and nudging it aside. It's still early, and his prosthesis never functions as well when he's sluggish.

"What?" he slurs, eyes half-open and hair a disaster.

"Email from the prosecutor. They've set a trial date."

Erwin sits up at that, the covers falling away to expose the fading remnants of bruises where the Ape had broken his ribs. "When?"

"March 15th. Says we're required to testify, but blah blah witness protection we'll be testifying from behind a screen with our voices modulated. So basically you'll be even more robotic."

Erwin huffs and reaches for Levi with his prosthetic arm to poke him in the ribs. "Will you never shut up about the robot thing?"

Levi snorts. "No. And also Eren and Mikasa are testifying. Same protocols, since they're witness protection too."

Erwin flops back down, groaning, and rolls onto his front, jamming his face into the pillow. His words are barely audible. "I'm not sure this witness protection thing is worth all the trouble. Making all of us move, getting new identities... seems pointless when there could be Titans in the witness protection office."

"Hanji said her contacts are going to keep an ear to the ground for anything involving us, and they did a good job helping me find you. They're efficient, for double-agents." Levi lies back down too, since Erwin seems close to falling back asleep and Levi sees no point in being awake otherwise.

"She and her contacts going to testify?"

Levi scrolls through the email, but half the damn thing's written in legal jargon. He might have to get Eren to figure it out. "Uh... Hanji is, but it looks like her contacts are going to be testifying under closed conditions; I think it's just going to be an audiotape of them."

Makes sense, considering who they are.

"Any idea how long this trial will take?" Erwin's slurring his words now, scratching his chest and turning onto one side.

"Well, unfortunately it's already been declared the fucking trial of the century since the Ape will be standing trial with her guys. I'm sure the government will be chomping at the bit to try and get her to confess everything about the attacks, where the Titans are, how they work." Levi shrugs. "It won't work. There's nothing they can do with someone like her, even if they use illegal methods."

"Mmm," Erwin says, and then he's out like a light. No surprise, really; he hasn't been home from the hospital that long, and Levi knows better than most how long it takes to recover from captivity. Not to mention some of the medications he takes have somnolent side effects.

Levi shifts, antsy, his morning erection making itself known. While he can easily take care of the problem by himself, he'd like to be fucked, and he hasn't been fucked in a while, not that Levi begrudges the fact. The few times they've had sex since Erwin came home, it's been Levi topping Erwin and fucking Erwin exactly how Erwin wants, and while he enjoys it quite a bit - nice to have a Dom that doesn't think being penetrated equates to submission - he... wants.

Well, at least while Erwin's sleeping, he can plan.

-

Erwin frowns at the paper detailing all of the exercises he's supposed to do every day with his prosthesis, then turns to frown at the prosthesis.

The thumb gently waves in the direction of the middle finger but refuses to touch it, just like it's done the last two times he's tried. Which should be fine in his opinion - how many times will he need the ability to precisely touch his thumb to his middle finger - but the rehab therapists were annoyingly firm about the necessity of his keeping up with his exercises.

Levi pads into the room from the bathroom, swimming in one of Erwin's T-shirts, his damp hair curling at the ends and brows drawn together in a frown.

"Erwin."

"Yes?" Erwin says absently, most of his attention focused on twitching what remains of his right trapezius in the correct pattern.

"Erwin," Levi says again, and this time Erwin turns to find Levi standing disconcertingly close, expression unreadable.

"Did you want something?" He can't think of anything he's done to annoy Levi lately - there was the time he accidentally referred to Levi's gun as a Wesson and Levi refused to look at him for a solid day, but he gave Levi an apology blowjob and-

"Excuse me?"

Now Levi looks annoyed. "Did the doctors take your ears, too?" He stalks forward and drops down into Erwin's lap like it belongs to him. He then reaches for Erwin's left arm, seemingly ignorant of the fact that it belongs to Erwin, and pulls it forward, and down, and right onto-

"I said," Levi says, staring at Erwin like he might kill him, "I want you to fuck me."

"Ah." Erwin blinks. "I thought that was what you said." He catches hold of the end of the plug Levi's so obligingly guided his hand to, the steel cold against his fingers, and rocks it just a bit, enough that Levi shifts, eyes darkening. "Where did you get this?"

"I bought it online, unimportant, would you just-" and Levi's eyes flutter shut with a moan as Erwin presses the tip of the plug into his prostate and holds it there. "Oh, yes," he says, hips rolling back, the movement so sensual and unconscious Erwin's mouth goes dry just looking at him. His voice is already dropping, words slurring, and Erwin's missed this. Missed him, the way he just soaks up the pleasure, greedy for Erwin's attention.

"It has been a while." Erwin lets go of the plug, traces his finger around where it enters Levi's body, savoring the tremble it garners him. "And I've missed being inside you, all tight and hot and quivering-" he slips his hand up inside the hem of Levi's T-shirt, drags his nails up along Levi's spine, curls his fingers in Levi's hair, "-listening to you scream when you take my cock," he finishes, tightening his grip and pulling Levi's head back until Levi's forced to bend, back arched in a straining bow.

Levi goes with it, hands limp at his sides, trusting Erwin to hold him up. He opens his eyes enough to look at Erwin, mouth twisting in a smile. "You could fuck me here," he says without an ounce of shame. He rocks down into Erwin, jolting his spine with a thick coil of heat. "Seems you like the idea."

"I could." Erwin lets go of Levi's hair, gets his arm out from underneath the shirt - he'll never get over the thrill of possession it gives him, seeing Levi in one of his shirts, smelling of him. "But I've got a better idea. Take that shirt off, go into the bedroom, and kneel on the floor, at the foot of the bed. Leave the plug in."

Levi's interested now, brow furrowed, wheels turning behind his eyes. "Can I touch myself?"

"Go ahead," Erwin says, grinning. He curls his hand about Levi's half-hard cock, rubs his thumb over the slit until Levi's shaking with it, a red flush spreading across his cheeks. "But don't you dare come, boy," and yes, that word tastes so right, is so good, because Levi moans low, eyes heavy-lidded.

"Understood, sir," says Levi, though the words have slurred, become half-begging as he keeps still with an effort, sucking in a hard breath through his nose when Erwin digs the side of his thumbnail into his frenulum.

Erwin will never get tired of hearing that word in Levi's mouth, not when it signifies so much: trust, love, acknowledgement that Levi, in all his power and will, is choosing to obey, without reservations or regret. The choice means everything.

Erwin releases Levi and sits back in his chair. "Go on."

Levi bolts from his lap so quickly it's hilarious, managing to wrestle the shirt off and over his head within two steps. It floats to a stop atop one of the standing lamps, and just after the bedroom door closes, Erwin gets up with a sigh to pull it off. Wouldn't do anyone any good to have their Witness Protection apartment burn down.

Really, though, it's wonderful to see Levi playful enough that he can fling his shirt aside like it's nothing; scarce weeks ago, Erwin would've had to watch Levi fold every item of clothing and put them in the hamper before getting down to the scene.

He folds the shirt and puts it aside, taking a moment to stretch his left arm and shoulder. It's still healing from what the Titans did to him, not to mention the several surgeries necessary to repair his rotator cuff. At least some of the anti-anxiety meds he takes have muscle relaxant properties, so they work on his shoulder, too.

Simple pleasures.

Though Levi, on his knees in the bedroom and no doubt vibrating with impatience, can't be termed simple in any way, shape, or form.

He waits outside the bedroom door to give Levi some time to work himself up, taking the time to think about the coming scene. A shame they had to leave so much of Erwin's modified furniture and the hidden hoist in his bedroom ceiling back in the house; he can think

of a good few uses for those things now. Still, he's got Levi, and his own creativity, and that's really all he needs.

Erwin closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, then another, settling into himself, focusing.

He opens his eyes, turns, pushes open the bedroom door.

Levi looks up and grins, open, unashamed, and Erwin has to lean against the doorframe and drink in the sight of Levi, kneeling on the carpet, stroking himself, slow, the pink head of his cock peeking through pale fingers, a flush starting in his cheeks, spreading down onto his neck. His toes curl with every stroke, every touch eliciting a soft moan. He stretches, all too aware of Erwin's eyes on him, tips his head back to expose his vulnerable throat, and that's it, Erwin's done.

He pushes off the doorframe, strides behind Levi - "Keep looking forward," he says, when Levi begins to turn - and drops to his knees behind Levi, presses himself against Levi's back, props his chin on the top of Levi's head.

Levi sighs, pushes back into him, free hand groping for Erwin's prosthesis. He finds it, squeezes it, and though the flare of pressure sensors in his brain can't ever be mistaken for real touch, the fact that Levi does it at all - treats his new arm like a part of him - is enough to have Erwin swallowing, half-overcome.

"So," he says, resting his hand on Levi's chest: sweat-slick, hot, Levi's heart beating against his fingers. "You want me to fuck you, hm?"

"Yes, sir," Levi says, and he must have been practicing, must have done something to get that sinful purr in his voice, submission with a tinge of mischief. "Very much so, if the fact that I spent fifteen minutes in the shower jerking off to the image didn't clue you in."

Erwin smothers his smile in Levi's hair. Manages to keep his voice grave as he says, "I have been neglecting you, then." He pulls his hand back, catching Levi's nipple between thumb and forefinger and giving it a quick twist - Levi's hips jerk, his groan suffusing the air. His hand stutters on his cock, and he drops his head back onto Erwin's chest, closing his eyes.

Erwin draws his fingers down Levi's spine - less prominent, thank goodness, and keeping Levi that way gives Erwin an excuse to try out the most decadent recipes he can think of - and then hooks his fingers into the plug's end, rocking it.

"Tell me, what were you thinking of when you slid this in? My fingers? My cock?"

It's started to be a game they play, telling each other their fantasies, and Erwin takes so much joy in getting Levi - so reticent outside of their apartment, all surly glares and hunched form - to open up, unfurl, whisper his desires.

"One moment. Eyes closed, Levi." Erwin's knees are starting to kill him, and he's had an idea. He creaks to his feet and drags the floor-length mirror to face the end of the bed - it's one of those ghastly free-standing mirrors one finds in a grandmother's house, and Erwin will have to give his old interior decorator's name to Witness Protection when all this is over. He tilts

the mirror down some, and then returns to the edge of the bed, sitting down on the floor and leaning back against the bedframe.

Reaches out and pulls Levi back into him, and Levi comes willingly, eyes still closed, and yes, all right, that deserves a reward. Erwin kisses those closed, quivering eyelids, still shaded purple with not enough sleep, and Levi mutters,

"Bleeding heart."

"Just for you," Erwin says. "You can open your eyes, by the way."

"Damn well better be just for me," Levi grouses, but he opens his eyes and catches Erwin's gaze in the mirror, a small smile tugging at his mouth.

"Safewords?"

"Green, yellow, red," Levi answers without a pause.

"All right." Erwin rests his left hand on Levi's chest, curls his prosthetic fingers about Levi's hip, all his attention fixed on the blurry sensation of the pressure sensors. "Too tight?"

"Mm, you could go a little further," Levi says, cocking his head enough to gaze at Erwin's hand. "Tighter, okay - yellow, that's a bit too much."

Erwin relaxes his hand, making a note of the amount of pressure he's used. They have to do this little ritual often; the calibrations on the pressure sensors change depending on what he's been doing, and after he accidentally bruised Levi's hip - Levi had laughed it off, but Erwin had felt horrible - he insists on checking before every scene.

He props his chin on the top of Levi's head and gets his knees beneath Levi's, bends his legs and spreads them to expose Levi completely - red and dripping cock, the hint of shining metal stretching him open - grinning at Levi in the mirror. He's beautiful, flushed and sweaty and already a bit disheveled.

"What were you thinking of in the shower?" Erwin whispers into Levi's ear, amused at Levi's shudder, the stutter of his hand on his cock. "Was there something in particular you wanted me to do to you?"

Levi swallows, throat bobbing, tips his head back into Erwin's chest. "Yeah. Something I've been thinking about-" and then he bites his lip, slips into silence, and the sudden shyness intrigues Erwin. Levi's very good at asking for what he wants, but if it's something with the power to make him burn red, then it must be something emotional, something affectionate.

"I hope you don't think you can get away with not telling me," Erwin says, reaching down with his prosthetic hand to wrap his hand about Levi's and force him to keep masturbating.

Levi jerks, one of those full-body ripples when pleasure overwhelms him, and gasps, "No, sir, but it's just. Hard."

"It's just a fantasy. It doesn't have to happen unless you want it to." God, Levi's wet, Erwin's hand can glide on his cock so smoothly. "But judging from this, you want it to."

"Yes," Levi says, his free hand darting to Erwin's pant leg, fingers curling tight. "I do, but-"

"Start at the beginning. Where are you? Close your eyes if you need to." Erwin slows the pace, holds his hand steady, only the slow roll of his thumb over Levi's crown for stimulation.

Levi gives him a grateful look in the mirror, then closes his eyes. "I'm kneeling on the ground, painting, and you come in the room. You don't say anything, but I can feel you standing behind me, waiting. Watching me. There's a clink. Metal. You rest your hand on my neck and pull me back into your thigh, don't let me turn towards you. I drop my paintbrush. You ask me to open my mouth in that fucking voice, you know the one, where you get all gravelly, and when I do, you have your dog tags, and you..." he's blushing so hard Erwin can feel the heat of him radiating against the bottom of his chin, the muscles of his legs twitching in the urge to cover himself, to hide.

"What do I do with them?" He still has his dog tags; they're in his nightstand, clean and waiting, and he had- he'd wanted to give them to Levi, to offer them as a collar, and then the Titans had come, and it had... gotten lost, in the fear and the shuffle.

"You put them in my mouth. I can taste the metal, the cold, your name against my tongue." Levi shifts, then gasps when Erwin grasps one nipple between his left thumb and forefinger and pulls it, twists it until it's a red hot little nub, and Levi's panting with it, the words slurred.

"You tell me I have to keep them in my mouth while you paddle me, and if I do, I'll get to keep them." Levi opens his eyes, and they're dazed, his pupils huge, gaze drifting until he sees Erwin in the mirror. "If I get to keep them, I get another reward." He licks his lips. They're shining in the light, and Erwin wants to do so much to him, wants to shove him onto his back on the carpet and kneel astride his chest, paint shining smears on Levi's lips with his cock, the most elemental form of possession he knows.

"Do you keep them?" Erwin says, dropping his head to kiss Levi's neck, suck a bruise there.

"Yes," Levi sighs, arching into Erwin's mouth. "You work me over hard, until I'm red and aching from knees to ass, but I keep them in my mouth, even though it hurts, even though I want to scream. Then you come around the bed to the front- ah-" Erwin licks at the bite he's left on Levi's shoulder, "-and you tell me to give the tags to you."

"And then what do I do?" Erwin's got an idea, but he wants to hear Levi say it.

Levi swallows. Twists. His cock jumps in Erwin's hand. "You put them around my neck, and you-" he hesitates, swallows his words.

"Say it," Erwin hisses, hot against his ear.

"You say that's where they'll stay," Levi manages, the words broken, half-sobbed, "because you're keeping me. You're not letting me go. And it's- it's something good, something I want that I get to keep. That won't leave."

“I would never,” Erwin promises. He has to work to keep the emotions out of his voice, to keep them in the scene. He drags his left hand down Levi’s back, scratching, and presses the pad of his thumb at Levi’s rim, tight about the thin metal stem of the plug, rubs until Levi’s gasping, hips rolling back against him. “Tell me. What do I do?”

Levi sucks in a hard breath, his eyes dazed, flickering, his heartbeat hammering in Erwin’s ears as Levi trembles. “You tell me to stay on the bed, and you work me open with your fingers, until I’m squirming, until I can’t take it anymore, and then you- oh god-“

Erwin eases his finger into the hot clench of him, curls it to pull Levi open, hold him empty and wanting. “Yes?”

“You fist me,” Levi blurts, shaking, eyes shut tight, “and the whole time you’re doing it, the whole time you’re making me take it, you’ve got your hand on the dog tags to keep me there.”

Oh. Erwin has to take a deep breath to keep from coming in his pants like a teenager. “We could do that,” he says, low, predatory, sliding another finger inside Levi, loving the twist and cry it gets. “I could spend hours opening you up, getting you ready to take my hand.”

“Now your turn,” Levi manages, and sags back into Erwin when Erwin pulls his fingers free.

“There’s a room in the club,” Erwin begins, staring at the mirror, at the two of them. Levi, pale and scarred and skinny, trembling with need, surrounded by Erwin, the blunt raw possessiveness of him, his hand dark and huge on Levi’s cock. Feels wolfish, ravenous, aching to consume Levi, to bare all his secrets. “It has rings in the ceiling, and a metal post in the center. I’d cuff your wrists, tie them to the rings so you can’t move forward or back, blindfold you – black silk, it’d look beautiful on you – so all you can do is feel, you can’t see a thing. Do you know what I’d do with the post?”

“No,” Levi breathes, still stroking his cock with Erwin’s guidance, legs trembling. “Tell me, sir.”

Erwin muffles his smile in Levi’s hair, continues to rub his fingers around Levi’s entrance until it’s red, clenching against him. “I’d attach a dildo to it. The biggest one I own, a little smaller than my fist, and I’d position the tip just here-“ he pulls the plug out in one go, replaces it with three fingers, and Levi convulses in his arms, a shocked cry tearing from his throat, body tightening on his hand, “and it’ll stretch you so wide, spear you open.

“You’ll have two choices. Keep yourself on your toes or sink down onto your feet, further onto that massive thing-“ he pushes his fingers deeper, twists them, and Levi’s fingers dig into his thighs, will leave bruises when this is done, Levi’s breathing a hoarse rasp, his eyes wide and blind, “-and you’ll writhe. You’ll scream for me. Because I’ll be watching, my sweet boy, sitting in a chair across from you, listening to you beg, watching you twist because you won’t know if you can take it, if your body has room for that thick cock inside you-“

“Oh, god,” Levi sobs, shaking, twisting.

“And then your legs will give out, and you’ll sink all the way onto it, and you’ll come-“

“Yellow!”

Erwin rips his hand away from Levi’s cock, breathing hard. “What’s wrong?”

Levi twists enough to look up at him. He’s wrecked, hair damp with sweat, eyes glassy. “I’m sorry, I just- I didn’t want to come, because you told me not to, and I didn’t want to disappoint you.”

Erwin melts. Bends to kiss Levi’s slack mouth, pour all his affection into it. “You could never disappoint me.”

Levi smiles against his mouth. Pulls away enough to say, “Starting to believe that.” His smile is a crooked, beautiful wonder. “You could convince me more, though.”

Erwin laughs, pushes Levi away, creaks to his feet. “All right, get on the bed, you mouthy thing.”

Levi slinks up onto the bed and kneels in the center of it, waiting.

Erwin tilts his head, considers. "Hands and knees for now." While Levi gets into position, he strips, kicking his pants away and flinging his shirt in some indeterminate direction before climbing onto the bed behind Levi, who's taken position, head up, facing the headboard. His cock sways between his legs, and some day Erwin will have to take his flogger to it, watch Levi twist into the sting.

"Good boy," Erwin says, running one hand down Levi's spine, and Levi arches his back into the touch and practically purrs. Erwin settles both hands on Levi's ass, holds him open, stares right at him: the delicate red furl of muscle, clenching beneath his gaze, shiny with the lube he used to get the plug in. He's going to wreck this man, turn him into a live wire of need.

"Erwin," Levi says, half a whine, and then his voice splinters into a gasp when Erwin bends and presses a filthy sucking kiss to his entrance.

"Erwin, fuckkk..." and he's already lost, his hands curling into fists in the sheets, toes rucking the fabric up as Erwin slides one thumb inside, hooks it, pulls him open enough to flick his tongue into the wet rich heat of him, and Levi shakes. Erwin pulls back.

"Don't like it?" Erwin says, but he can see the side of Levi's face, the agonized want in his expression.

"God, that's filthy, you're not kissing me with that mouth-" and Levi howls, one elbow buckling, as Erwin smacks his cock, though it's more the surprise than the sting.

"Yes or no, boy?"

Levi twists, gaze burning, and hisses, "Yes," the word breaking apart as Erwin takes him at his word, hooks one arm about Levi's hips, yanks him back into his mouth so he can't get away, so he has to take it. Licks him open like an animal, spears him open with his tongue, drives one finger into him to hold him stretched wide and quivering, red and wet and easy, slick with spit.

Levi's trembling, gasping, collapsed onto the bed, hips held up by Erwin's arm. Red-faced and panting, his hands clawing at the sheets, his words a jumble of "Erwin," and "sir," and "fuck." Sweat drenches his hair, coal-black against the sheets, and his eyes are just as black, gone.

It's near-frenzy, the feeling of it; it drives Erwin berserk, having Levi this open, this wanting, pierced open on his fingers and tongue and wanting more, writhing, begging for Erwin's fingers, his cock. He rears back, slides another finger into Levi, and Levi groans, hitches his hips back into it, fucks Erwin's fingers like a wild thing, an animal in heat.

"God, look at you, the way you're just- taking it-" and he pushes another finger into the sloppy wet fire of him, spreads them wide just to see if Levi'll take it, but of course he does, the greedy beautiful thing-

"Sir, please," Levi manages against the sheets, against the wet spot where he's gasped open-mouthed, and his voice is shredded, gone.

Erwin bares his teeth. Triumph surges inside him. He's made Levi this, brought him this far. He drops his free hand to Levi's cock, strokes him rough, shoves his fingers hard into Levi's prostate and massages until Levi screams, an animal sound.

"All right, come, boy," Erwin says, and Levi sobs, locks up -

Comes into Erwin's hand, tightens on Erwin's fingers.

"Good boy, good, good boy," Erwin's mumbling random praise at this point, all his attention fixed on Levi like he is the pole star, magnetic north. Pulling everything he is to a single fine point, just by the way he shakes, knees skidding against the sheets.

He pulls his fingers out, wipes his hands off on the sheets - Levi will no doubt make some snarky comment about it later - and sits back. Watches.

Levi's utterly wrecked. Red-faced, wild-haired, shuddering with exhaustion, no doubt raw and over-sensitive, and yet-

He can take more.

Erwin can make him take more. Can reclaim this territory, this man he's almost lost, that the Titans would take from him, still.

"I'm going to fuck you," he says, low and hoarse. Bestial with need.

Levi's breath hitches. He shoves his face into his arms as if to hide from Erwin, but Erwin can hear him whisper, voice in tatters, "Green."

Erwin surges forward like the tide, inexorable. Grabs Levi by the hips and flips him onto his back, and Levi just goes with it, though he winces.

Erwin freezes, uncertain for a moment. Is he hurting Levi beyond bearing? Working out his fear and nightmares with pain?

Levi gives him his beautiful crooked smile and reaches for him with tired hands, shaking fingers fitting to his jaw. "Come on, you said you were going to fuck me," he says, "unless you're too old?"

Erwin ducks his head into Levi's shoulder, smells him, all sweat and life, and rasps out a great sound he'll never acknowledge as a sob. He can have this. He still gets to touch Levi, and love him, and work out his fear in someone who reflects it back better, reflects him back whole.

Levi runs his fingers through his hair, over the awful seam of his scar. Runs a hand down Erwin's prosthesis to squeeze his fingers.

"It's okay," Levi says, solemn. His heartbeat loud in Erwin's ears. "Come on."

Erwin's hips roll, seeking, find, and he slides into Levi in fits and starts, gasping, broken open with need. But he can't- can't visit this violence inside him upon someone who's lived it-

Levi hisses, hands stuttering in their ceaseless touches. He pulls Erwin's head up with hands on his jaw, stares him in the eye.

"Come on," Levi says, and his nails are digging into Erwin's jaw, "fuck me like you mean it, sir."

Erwin bares his teeth, and Levi grins, wolfish, animal, says softly, "There you are," and throws his head back on a shout as Erwin plants his hands by Levi's shoulders and drives into him with every bit of strength he possesses.

Levi's laughing even as Erwin's sweat falls on his face, as Erwin hunches over and snarls, snaps his hips into him until he screams. He can have this, can control this, can make Levi yield because Levi sees him as worthy.

Levi's over-sensitive, writhing, captured beneath him, gasping with every thrust, his fingers digging bruises into Erwin's shoulders. There's tears in his eyes.

"Come," Erwin manages, and then he lunges into Levi one more time, until he's nearly bent double, and freezes; shakes; comes.

Levi howls. His heel knocks Erwin in the kidneys, his fingers drive deep. Come spatters his chest.

They hang together, their breathing mingled, drowning out all sound, all thought.

Levi stares at him like he's reborn. Made new, or returned from darkness.

Erwin turns his head to kiss the inside of Levi's knee, where the blood beats blue against the skin. One thing, of millions he thought he would never do again. One thing he gets to keep, of the millions of gifts Levi brings him, and he will keep them all.

Levi comes back to himself slowly, gently, buoyed upwards on the warm rise of lassitude, the safety of Erwin tucked behind him, hand resting on Levi's chest. He blinks, stretches, muscles aching, whole body throbbing.

He feels well-used, well-fucked, like he's poured out all his tension and fear into Erwin's hands and been given back calmness, quiet. Sunlight filtering over their rumpled sheets. The pulse of Erwin's breath against his neck.

Silence in his head.

"Awake?" Erwin whispers, as if afraid to break the silence.

"Yes," Levi says, the word blurred about the edges. The world swims in soft focus, without fear or anxiety or future, and all he has to do is lie here, wrapped up in Erwin, and be. Enjoy. Relax.

Erwin kisses the back of his neck. "Look down."

Erwin's hand, tucked against his chest, unfurls, fingers opening, revealing the thin silver tags within, etched with name and number and rank.

There's no surprise. This moment seems inevitable as time and tide: that Erwin would give him this. That Erwin, loving and kind and so good, the best thing Levi has ever known, would be such a man, would offer something so rare.

"I'd been wanting to offer them," Erwin says, and Levi can't see his face, but it doesn't matter: he knows Erwin's expressions like he knows his own heartbeat, the weight of his bones, can imagine the grave beauty of his expression. The desire there. "But the Titans came, and I- I thought maybe you wouldn't want them. That you wouldn't want to be reminded of what they'd done to you or me. But if you think I'm worthy of you, if those tags are worthy-"

Always the martyr.

Levi turns over, the dog tags dangling against his spine, against the tattoos that signify all he's lost, and looks at Erwin: the fear in his eyes, the hope in the tilt of his mouth. The dog tags with Levi's name and number looped about his throat, resting against his heart. The claim.

"Erwin," he says, and he will say that name forever, he will die with that name on his lips, "You are a fool. I'll always want them, want you, because I love you, you stupid idiotic man, and I trust you more than I've trusted anyone since my team, and if you'll keep me, then I'll be yours, because-" he falters, searches for words, for something that can match the joy in Erwin's face, the flutter of hope in his heart,

"When I'm with you I am unbroken."

Erwin gasps, a wrenching sound, and pulls Levi into him with one arm, drops the tags over his neck with the other, and they cling together, hold each other, heartbeat against heartbeat.

Now. Forever.

Chapter End Notes

Title from Vienna Teng's 'Never Look Away.' Comments, kudos, bookmarks, and criticism are adored. Talk to me on Bluesky [here](#) (18+ only) or check out my other social media [here](#) if you'd like.

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